The Bride's Ordeal

BY MRS. SOUTHWORTH

1988

9—

Dear
Jeanne,
I rescued
this book from the
trash outside an antique
shop in Cambridge earlier this
winter. I'm passing it along to you
strictly because I know that you
appreciate "finds"; not at all, of course,
because I think you have an ordeal ahead
of you. In fact, I think you have a
great adventure ahead of you and I
wish you love + joy + honesty in it. AND
I think you'll have them.
Merry, Merry Christmas!!
Love,
Diane

The Bride's Ordeal

A Novel

By MRS. E. D. E. N. SOUTHWORTH

Author of

"Gloria," "David Lindsay," "Em," "Em's Husband,"
"For Whose Sake," "Why Did He Wed Her?" Etc.

A. L. BURT COMPANY

PUBLISHERS : : :: NEW YORK

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GLORIA
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"THE BRIDE'S ORDEAL"

Printed by special arrangement with
STREET & SMITH

Rare
PS
2892
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1905

THE BRIDE'S ORDEAL.

CHAPTER I.

A MIDNIGHT RIDE.

The shadow and the horror of a doom,
Dark, lowering, fatal as the fury's ban,
Hung o'er that life, an ever-deepening gloom,
Forbidding love of woman, child, or man.

"Hi! Hi! Guard! Guard, I say! Hi!"

"All right, sir! Here I am!"

"Yes, but where in the demon are we? It is as dark as Erebus! As black as Tophet! As gloomy as the River of Styx! How far are we from the next stopping place?"

"All right, cap'n! We shall be at the old Red Fox by nine o'clock!"

"We should have been there at six! We are three hours behind time!"

"Just so, Cap'n Blantyre! Just as you say, sir! The night is pitch-dark, and also the roads are uncommon heavy and deep washed, along of all these here autumn rains! Touch the creeturs up there, Jim, can't you, or it might be midnight before we see the sign of the Red Fox," concluded the guard, as he swung himself back to his roost somewhere about the upper outside of his old coach, where he remained deaf to all future complaints.

The first speaker was one of eight weary and impatient inside passengers, by a large, lumbering and rather dilapidated old stagecoach that was slowly toiling up a long, steep road leading through the dense forest that clothed these hills and dales for hundreds of miles around.

Of the eight passengers, six sat facing each other—three on the middle seat, and three before them on the

front seat. These were all men, and they talked farming, trading and elections; or dozed, or treated each other from their pocket flasks, and were altogether very sociable.

But the back seat was occupied by two travelers exactly the reverse of the "gay and festive" six. They were a lady and a gentleman, and they sat apart, each in a corner. They had been fellow travelers from a distant city to this remote portion of the Old Dominion. They had kept these back seats day and night, except when they left them where the coach stopped for meals at the wayside hotels. But they had never spoken to each other or noticed each other, by even a glance.

The lady seemed, from her figure and motions, to be a youthful and delicate creature, but she was clothed in deepest mourning, and her face was concealed by a thick, black crape veil.

The gentleman was a man of medium height, slender form and dark complexion, with dark mustache and hair.

Around these two was an atmosphere of coldness, reserve and isolation that not only kept them far apart from each other, but kept all their fellow passengers at a distance from both.

For an hour longer the old stagecoach crept slowly up the long, wooded hill, and then, after a brief pause, to allow the tired horses to recover their wind, went on with renewed spirit across the wooded plateau that formed the top of the hill, and then with a restrained haste down the long descent of the farther side to the wooded dale below—for here the whole country, if it could have been seen, would have shown a landscape of rolling wooded hills and dales.

From the darkness of the dell that the coach had now reached, lights gleamed out, showing glimpses of a cluster of white buildings, toward which it was rapidly approaching, while the guard joyously blew his horn.

"Thank Heaven, here is the Red Fox at last, and some chance of getting a supper!" exclaimed he whom the guard had called Capt. Blantyre, as the coach drew up before the commodious country tavern, to be immediately surrounded by a crowd of waiters, hostlers and idlers, all exclaiming at the lateness of the coach's arrival.

The passengers got out in a hurry, and hastened into the barroom—all except the silent gentleman and the veiled lady who occupied the back seat.

The gentleman descended leisurely and then turned, and, for the first time, silently offered his hand to the lady to assist her in alighting.

She bowed in acknowledgment of this dumb civility, and as silently accepted his help as she stepped out.

But in that clasp there was a thrill as of a slight electric shock that caused her quickly to withdraw her hand and pass on into the house.

She was the only lady passenger who came by that coach, and the attentive host of the Red Fox came to meet her, and showed her into a little parlor with white-washed walls, blue-paper-shaded windows, bare, pine floor, and plain, cherrywood table and chairs; but it was warmed by a bright, open wood fire, and lighted by a pair of mold candles, that stood in tall, brass candlesticks upon the wooden mantel shelf. The only work of art in this room was a sampler picture of a white tombstone rising from a bright-yellow graveyard toward a bright-blue sky, and shaded by a vivid-green willow tree.

"Would you like to go to a bedroom to lay off your bonnet before supper, miss? It will be on the table in ten minutes," said the host, as he set a chair for his only lady guest.

"No, I thank you. Has anyone come to meet me—Erma Wildering?" inquired the young lady, declining the offered seat, for she had been sitting long enough already.

The host paused to listen to the sweetest voice he had ever heard.

"Oh! Ah! Yes! You are the party expected, eh?" he said, recovering himself. "Mr. Clement Gladden's man, Jugurtha, has been waiting for you, with his carriage and horse, ever since five o'clock this afternoon. We expected the stagecoach at six o'clock, but it is three hours behind its time. Hows'ever, that happens more than often when the roads are heavy after rains."

"Will you tell Mr. Gladden's man that I am ready to go?" inquired the young lady.

"Certainly; but the old man put up the horse to feed

and rest while waiting for you. Will you walk into the dining room, and take supper while he is harnessing up?"

"I thank you, no; but you may send me a cup of tea and a biscuit here, if you will."

"Certainly," said the landlord again, as he left the room.

And now, being alone, the young stranger laid off the black crape bonnet and the heavy, black crape veil for a moment, to relieve her oppressed head, and she stood revealed.

A girl of perhaps seventeen summers, dressed in jet-black cashmere from throat to feet and wrists; with a slender, elegant form; regular, delicate features; intensely black hair, worn very plainly, parted on the top of her head, and wound in a large roll at the nape of her neck; intensely black eyes, fringed with long, drooping, black eyelashes, and arched by slender, jet-black eyebrows.

She must have been exceedingly beautiful but for the strange look of deadly pallor and fixed horror that seemed to have turned her young, living face to marble. No tear dimmed her eyes, no sigh passed her lips. There was only that marble fixedness of features from which every vestige of color seemed forever banished, leaving the white pallor to tell of the despair too deep for sighs or tears, and far too deep for words.

She walked slowly to and fro in the little parlor, until the entrance of a colored waitress with a tray, on which was arranged a cup of tea and a plate of biscuits.

The young lady sat down by the table on which the girl placed the simple refreshments, and began to drink the beverage with a feverish thirst.

"Will you have anything more, miss?" inquired the girl.

"No, thank you; you may go; but please let me know when the carriage is ready, and—bring my bill when you return."

"Yes, miss."

The girl left the parlor.

The young stranger arose and resumed her bonnet and veil.

Almost immediately afterward the landlord re-entered the parlor.

"The carriage is ready, miss."

"Thanks. I am ready, also; but my bill?"

"Excuse me, miss, but Mr. Clement Gladden sent a note by his man, saying as you were to have the best the house could afford, and the account was to be charged to him."

"He is very kind. Where is the carriage?"

"I will show you, miss."

The landlord of the Red Fox led the way to a side door, opening upon a porch thickly covered with a climbing rosebush, now full of red berries in the place of blossoms, as the young stranger could see by the light of the lamp her host carried in his hand.

This door was the private entrance and exit for the landlord's family, and also for ladies and children.

Before it stood the one-horse carriage that had been sent to meet Erma Wildering. It was a strongly built, but plain, little carriage, open in front.

The small, iron-bound traveling trunk that formed the only luggage of the young stranger was securely strapped on behind.

A small, slight, elderly negro, with a very black face and a very white head, stood beside this unpretending equipage.

On seeing the young lady he bowed and opened the little carriage door.

As she stepped toward it the landlord sprang forward, and helped her into the seat.

She bent her head in silent acknowledgment, and settled herself in her place.

The old negro got upon his seat immediately in front of the young lady.

"Now be sure you be careful, Jug. It's pretty late to be starting on sich a long ride! Sich a dark night, too," said the host, with kindly solicitude for the safety of the youthful stranger.

"Now don't you cuss your hair gray about that, ole marster. Brown Bellona and me is all right to carry the lady straight home. Get up, Bellona!" said the darky.

And touching his hat to the landlord of the Red Fox he drove off.

They passed down a shaded alley leading to the front of the house, and turned off to the right.

Erma Wildering bent forward to look out. A dark and cloudy sky overhead—a vast rolling landscape of wooded hills and dales all around; straight before them a rough country road, losing itself in the obscurity beyond.

There was so little to be seen that the young lady settled herself back in her seat and relapsed into the mournful reverie that had marked her mood throughout her long journey.

Not so the darky driver, who sat directly before her, idly holding the reins that did not guide Brown Bellona, for she knew the road home, and went it at a good pace.

Jug was, like all his kindly race, disposed to be sociable and talkative.

" 'Deed I dunno what Marse Clement'll think has come on me an' you, young mist'ess. We ought to a been home dar dese free hours ago an' more. But dar! I ain't gwine to cuss my hair gray"—his hair was already as white as cotton wool—" 'bout dat!"

"Is it far?" inquired Erma, in the deep, soft, bell-like voice, that had so impressed the landlord of the Red Fox, and that now so startled old Jugurtha as to make him pause to listen and forget to answer.

" 'Far!' he echoed, at length. "Oh, Lor', no, honey; it ain't far, if the roads wa'n't so bad and the night wasn't so dark—but dar! I ain't a gwine to cuss my hair gray 'bout dat!"

"How far is it?"

" 'Bout thirty mile, honey, from here to Brighthome."

"Thirty miles?"

"Yes, honey; but that ain't nothin' for these parts. Why, we goes twenty miles to church Sundays. And I drives and puts up de horses and 'tends service," added the old man, in the spirit of communicativeness.

But the young lady had fallen again into her former state of mournful meditation.

The old man chattered on, but failed to arouse her attention. Seeing this, he became silent; then began to

hum a camp-meeting hymn in a low voice, that gradually became higher until, at last, he burst into full song with the favorite

"I've left my sins in the wilderness."

"I reckon, young mist'ess, how de wilderness as is there spoken of is jes' sich a one as dis what me and you is now passing through."

As the young lady made no remark, the old coachman sank again into a discouraged silence; but not for a long time. He soon began again.

"You dunno what's before you, honey, a coming to our house! You dunno Rooster and Flurry! Umk—oome! If that Rooster and Flurry don't make you wish you was in hebben 'fore de week is out, I don't know nuffin.

"'Oh! hebben it is my happy home!'"

he broke forth, and sang the hymn quite through without stopping.

"'Deed, honey, I pities you when I thinks of that Rooster and Flurry!"

"Do you mean Master Eustace and Miss Fleurie Fleetwood?" inquired the soft, deep-toned voice of the young lady.

The old man paused as before, to drink in and dwell upon the music of her voice, and then replied:

"Yes, honey, dem! Which nobody but deir own doting mother and Marse Clement Gladden would ever put up wid dey two! But dere! I ain't agwine to cuss my hair gray a thinking about 'em. Get up, can't you, Brown Bellona?"

The mare did get up, but not in the desired way. On the contrary, she began to rear and plunge and dash from side to side like a beast in a fit.

Old Jug pulled on the reins with all his strength, falling back almost on his passenger.

"What is the matter with the horse?" inquired the lady, but without the slightest anxiety.

"I dunno, young mist'ess! I's afeard—well, I think how you better get out. Maybe I can hold her in till you do. But she's gettin' most too much for me, I tell you!"

Erma Wildering bent forward as well as she could to examine the position.

They were on a part of the road that had been raised to cross a deep hollow between two hills. The road was good, but narrow, having a fall of several feet upon each side—safe enough by day with a quiet horse, but extrtmely dangerous by night with a restive animal.

Erma Wildering took in the situation at a glance, and her marble face changed, not with anxiety, but with wild expectation—an insane hope!

Was the horse going to kill her? Was she about to be suddenly delivered from all her despair, without the sin of suicide?

"For de Lord's sake, young mist'ess, if you loves your life, jump out'n dis carriage, immediate, while I holds her in! While I kin hold her in, for I shall git out presently, and then Lord knows which bank she'll pitch us over!"

Only for an instant did the girl hesitate, and then she remembered that to neglect the means of safety was as much an act of suicide as to kill herself, and she opened the door and sprang out of the carriage, lighting easily on the road.

At this moment the sounds of a horse's heels were heard approaching swiftly from behind, and, in another moment, while old Jug sprang from his seat and leaped forward to Bellona's head, the horseman drew rein beside the carriage and inquired:

"What is the matter?"

"Oh! marster, I thanks de Lord you have come, whoever you is! Dis debbil of an old mare is tuk with the blind staggers here at midnight, on de werry worstest part ob de road, and has almost pulled both my arms outen deir sockets, tryin' to pull away, while I hold her in an' keep her from pitching of de carriage over de bank, and killing me and de young lady!" cried Jug, with breathless eagerness and rapidity, as he held on to the bit and danced up and down with the rearing animal.

Without a word the stranger dismounted, tied his own horse to a near tree and went to Bellona's head and took the bit, saying, quietly:

"Do you unharness the animal."

Jug promptly obeyed, and soon the shafts fell with a

rattle to the ground, and the half-conquered mare, who had found her master or her doctor, was led easily away.

"You know what to do for her?" inquired the newcomer.

"Oh! yes, marster; bleed her in de mouf."

"Well, then, come and do it. Here is a sharp penknife."

The negro came and took the offered instrument, and applied it to its new use.

Good results immediately followed. The mare became perfectly quiet, and laid herself down by the road.

All this Erma witnessed from her standpoint by the carriage.

The stranger now stepped to her side.

"I hope that you have received no injury," he said.

"None whatever, I thank you, sir," she answered.

The stranger, like poor old Jug, paused to drink in, to dwell on, the most melodious voice he had ever heard in his life, and, perhaps, wondered if the hidden face was as beautiful.

Here old Jug joined them, and appealed to the stranger in these words:

"Yes, marster; de horse is all right herself, now, but I wouldn't trust her to drag dis precious load dis dark night over dese roads, no way; and what's to be done about de young lady, I dunno."

"Is there any house near this, do you know?" inquired the stranger.

"No, marster, not for fifteen miles. De nighest house is Brighthome, where we was a going, and that is full fifteen miles off. But dar! I ain't a gwine to cuss my hair gray about dat! Only what's to be done with the young lady I can't tell."

"I will see the young lady," said the stranger, who now entered upon full command of the position, and took all his measures without seeming to think it necessary, or even expedient, under these exceptional circumstances, to consult anyone else.

"Go and take the saddle off my horse and bring him here and harness him to the carriage."

Old Jug blindly obeyed the usurper, and wondered what was coming next.

Erma Wildering watched and listened with equal indifference and uncertainty.

"Now, take my saddle and bridle off the road and hang them in the thickest foliage you can find, that they may be kept dry in case the rain should fall."

Jug obeyed this order, also.

"Now, listen to me. Get your mare up as soon as you can, and lead her into the woods, and tether her there, and stay with her until she is fit to travel; then put my saddle and bridle on her, and lead her a part of the way and ride her slowly other parts, until you get her home."

"Yes, marster; but—de young lady," demurred the doubtful negro.

"I say I will take care of the young lady," replied the stranger, in a tone that silenced all impertinent opposition.

The old negro sighed and subsided.

The stranger opened the carriage door and turned to the young traveler, saying, courteously:

"If you will be so kind as to resume your seat, madam, I shall have the honor of driving you to Brighthome."

"But this will inconvenience you—take you out of your own road," the soft, deep voice of the lady replied.

"Not so; I am going to that neighborhood," said the stranger, as he took the hand of the young creature to assist her.

And before Erma Wildering could raise another objection, she found herself seated in the carriage again, thrilling from that strong, electric clasp.

The stranger stepped lightly up to his place in front, took the reins and drove off.

"Well!" muttered the terrified and bewildered old negro, staring into darkness after the retreating carriage, "if dat dere don't look like de debbil himself a running away wid de lady and de wagon, I don't know nufin! But dar! I ain't a gwine to cuss my old hair gray about dat!"

Meanwhile, the carriage containing the young lady and driven by the stranger went on—rolling rapidly through the dale, slowly climbing the steep hills, cautiously descending to the dell; yet in all the ups and downs of the road, never coming out of the great primeval forest that covered the whole country in this region.

"I think, madam," said the stranger, politely addressing his youthful companion as they were slowly ascending another steep and thickly wooded hill, "I think I have had the honor of being your fellow traveler in the stagecoach from Staunton. But I cannot be certain. Your veil, if you were there, was down during the whole journey."

"We were fellow travelers, sir. I recognized you at once. Permit me to say I can never sufficiently thank you for the trouble you have taken on my account," responded the "velvet-voiced" girl.

"Really—and I do not say it in the spirit of conventional politeness, but truly and literally—I have taken no trouble at all. I was on my way to the neighborhood of Brighthome, and it is as easy to drive as to ride," the stranger explained.

And here the short conversation ended; nor was it afterward resumed. They went on in silence, the road becoming more difficult and their progress slower with every mile.

The fifteen miles from the scene of the accident to Brighthome must have been estimated "as the bee flies." The heavy roads up and down hill made it seem more like forty-five.

The night was waning, the darkness fading before the first faint dawn of day, while yet they were some distance from Brighthome.

Erma bent forward to look out.

The clouds that had threatened rain were clearing away. Under the gray light of early morning she saw only the same monotonous beauty of landscape that had characterized the country for so many miles—rolling, wooded hills and dales. On her left hand—for they were driving southward—the faintest streak of gold on the edge of the eastern horizon announced the approach of the sun.

"How far are we from Brighthome?" she ventured, at length, to ask her reserved companion.

"Within three miles. We shall be there in half an hour," he replied, as he drew the left rein and turned into a cross road leading eastward.

Morning began to glow on the horizon; clouds of crimson purple and gold rolled up toward the zenith.

Then the sun sparkled up, shooting arrows of golden light in all directions through the foliage of the forest-crowned hills, kindling the crimson autumn leaves into a seeming conflagration, flashing on the waters of the little brooks that brightened the dells, sparkling in the few raindrops that hung here and there upon the trees and bushes like pendent diamonds, and shining full into the front of the little open carriage upon two as beautiful creatures as ever lived.

At first sight they might almost have been taken for brother and sister—at least, for very near kindred.

Relatively speaking, both were of medium size and of singularly elegant form and graceful bearing; both had regular, clearly chiseled features; both seemed to have black hair and black eyes; but here the resemblance ceased.

As the morning sun shone full into their faces, the rays brought out the marked difference between them.

I must give a more particular description of this man and woman, for, indeed, their personal appearance was in perfect correspondence with their characters, while their superficial resemblance and latent dissimilarity might account for that strong mutual attraction and repulsion they were destined to exercise upon each other.

The man was of middle height and slender, well-proportioned form; with fine aquiline features, dark complexion, dark-auburn hair and mustache, with red lights where the sun touched; and dark-brown eyes, with a red gleam from the iris—a gleam that might become lightning under excitement. He was evidently a man capable of deep, fiery and destructive passion; though now, as he held the reins with a careful hand and drove slowly up the forest hill, his face was as quiet as the muzzle of a loaded cannon.

The woman who sat behind him I have described before, and have little to add. Recall that she was clothed in the deepest mourning, that she was tall, slender and elegantly formed, with regular and delicate features of the pure Grecian type, with intensely black hair and intensely black eyes; but seen in the full light of the morn-

ing sun, her bright, black hair had a blue sheen, and her black eyes a blue ray.

This was the latent difference between the dark, handsome man and the dark, beautiful woman, seen by day —the red lights in his dark hair and dark eyes, the blue rays in hers.

She would have been a perfect type of beauty, but for the deadly whiteness of her complexion and the deep melancholy of her countenance.

When they reached the top of the hill the stranger drew the reins and stopped the carriage to breathe the horse, while he pointed forward with the handle of his whip, saying:

"There is Brighthome."

The girl bent forward to look, shading her dark eyes with one hand from the bright blaze of the sun.

A little dale lay before them, and, rising beyond that, another hill, from amid the highest grove of which arose the gable roof and chimneys of a white-walled dwelling house.

"It seems a pleasant place," said the girl, by way of saying something.

"I hope you will find it so," answered the stranger, as he touched the horse with his whip to start him.

They drove carefully down the hill, across the little dale, and slowly ascended the road leading up to Brighthome.

They soon reached the well-kept grounds of the place.

The sun was about a quarter of an hour high, and a few of the out-door servants were already at work—some gathering the autumn apples in the orchard; some raking the fallen leaves on the lawn.

One of the latter class of laborers ran and opened the iron gates for the travelers, and stared on seeing the master's little carriage drawn by a strange horse and driven by a strange man. The strange lady did not much surprise him—he expected one in that very carriage.

The man was too respectful to ask questions, however, so he only held the gate wide open and stared at the travelers as they passed through.

They drove on along a broad, clean, gravel drive, leading in a semicircle through a pleasant lawn, gay with

parterres of dahlias, chrysanthemums, hardy roses and other old-fashioned autumn flowers and shrubs and fragrant with balm, rosemary, lavender and other sweet-smelling herbs.

A very few minutes brought them in front of the house, a handsome, irregular building, like a cluster of white towers, turrets, gables, balconies, porches and verandas, half covered with creeping vines and climbing rose bushes, whose shining green leaves and glowing red berries formed a pretty contrast to the white walls they adorned.

The entrance to the house was as irregular as its whole structure. It was through an octagon portico, formed by the strong stone pillars under the principal corner tower.

Here the stranger drew up the carriage, and, alighting, held out his hand to assist his companion.

With a gentle nod she gave him hers, and stepped down on the flagstones.

The man glanced at her face and started very slightly at the unearthly whiteness, which he had not seen until now.

"Will you kindly inform me, sir, whom I must thank for this very opportune assistance?" inquired the young lady.

The stranger took off his soft, black felt hat, revealing a fine head with a singular air of distinction, and said:

"My name is Rodolph Wolfsohn. I am very happy to have been of the slightest service to Miss ——"

"I am Erma Wildering, Mrs. Fleetwood's new governess," replied the girl, in answer to the delicately insinuating question.

He bowed low, and then stepped upon the portico and knocked.

The door was opened by a smart-looking, bright-eyed negro boy of about eighteen years of age.

"Is your master up?" inquired Mr. Wolfsohn.

"No, sir; none of the family isn't up; leastways, none of 'em is down," replied the boy.

"Are any of the women servants up?"

"Oh, yes, sir! All is! Aunt Winny Wicket, and Hinda, and all."

"Then go and bring some one here to receive this young lady and make her comfortable."

The boy favored the young lady with a long stare, and then went on his errand.

Mr. Wolfsohn drew out a chair and invited Erma Wildering to sit down while waiting for her reception.

In a few moments Winny Wicket, the plump, little, good-natured, colored housekeeper, came forward.

"Here is Miss Wildering, the young lady whom your mistress is expecting. You will, of course, make her comfortable until the family are ready to receive her. An accident happened on the road, but no one is hurt. Miss Wildering will explain. I shall drive around to the stable and leave the carriage, and borrow a saddle and bridle for my horse. Jugurtha has my own saddle; he can bring it home and get back the borrowed one. Miss Wildering, good-morning."

So saying, the stranger bowed, replaced the soft, black felt hat upon his head, and left the house, leaving Winny Wicket staring after him.

CHAPTER II.

WHAT WAS SHE?

Widowed wife, or wedded maid,
Betrothed, betrayer, or betrayed?

—WALTER SCOTT.

"Well, I do 'clare to my 'Vine Marster!" exclaimed Winny Wicket, with her little black eyes snapping—"to hurry off in dat way 'dout giving a body time to ax him anyfing at all! Run, Quil! Dun down to de stable an' catch him, an' ax him, yer Aunt Winny Wicket say, how won't he please to stop an' see de ole marster, an' have breakfas' before he goes. Run, Quil!"

The bright-eyed negro boy hastened on this errand.

Then Winny Wicket turned her attention to the young lady.

"Come upstairs, honey! Yer room's been ready for yer ever since yes'day. Fires was kept up all night, 'spectin' of yer. Old marse and young mis' sot up till arter

twelve, waitin' for yer, which I reckon is de reason wot makes 'em sleep so late dis mornin'. Come upstairs, honey. Been ridin' all night?" suddenly inquired Winny Wicket, turning her head, with her hand on the banisters, and looking back and noticing for the first time the whiteness of the stranger's face.

"I have been riding for several nights," replied Erma.

"'Deed! has yer?" exclaimed Winny Wicket, cheerfully, and still pausing on the stairs and looking back. "Well, dat 'counts for yer bein' so pale an' gashly. An' de acc'ent, too! Was it much of an acc'ent? But come upstairs, honey, an' 'fresh yerself, an' den yer kin tell me all about it," she added, considerately, leading the way.

On the upper landing she saw a cheery-looking young colored housemaid, loitering.

"Hinderer, you go right downstairs an' tell one ob de boys to bring up dis young lady's trunk. Right off, now, mind yer."

"Yes, mammy."

"Wot's yer name, honey?"

"Wildering," answered the young stranger.

"Miss Bewilderin's trunk—do yer hear?"

"Yes, mammy."

"Well, go, den. Wot yer mean, a-standin' dere starin' at de young lady for? Didn't yer nebber see no young ladies before?" sharply demanded Mrs. Wicket.

Her daughter, thus admonished, hurried down the stairs to do her errand.

Winny Wicket took her charge on to an octagon-shaped hall that seemed to be directly above the octagon portico, and from which opened several doors leading into divers suites of apartments.

Four windows—two east and two south—commanded the view of the pleasant forest country through which Erma had come.

A bright wood fire burned in the fireplace in the west side, and a comfortable, old-fashioned, four-post bedstead stood with its head to the north on the north side. Windows and bedstead were curtained with fine blue chintz and white mull muslin, and chairs and sofas were covered to match.

There was no paper on the walls, that were white and

smooth as ivory, nor any carpet on the floor, that was clean and polished as satinwood. A good picture of a sleeping child and a guardian angel hung over the mantelpiece; Turkey rugs lay before the fireplace and beside the bed.

Between the east windows stood an old-time dressing table with a full valance of white mull muslin over blue chintz, and a top cover of fine needlework over a blue foundation. Above this a large, clear, oval mirror, with its frame covered with the same blue and white materials, and adorned with bows of blue and white ribbon. On the table were scent bottles of cut glass, toilet boxes of satinwood, comb and hair brushes of ivory, a pincushion of lace over blue satin, and, in short, every elegant accessory of the toilet table that a young lady might desire. A door at the side of the fireplace led into a commodious little bathroom, fitted up with every requisite for cleanliness.

"How's yer like yer room, honey?" inquired Winny Wicket, with a look of conscious merit on her chubby black face.

"It is very pleasant," answered Erma.

"Well, honey, you has got the softest voice I ebber heerd in all my life; but it almost does make me cry. Is you sick, honey, or is yer sorry? Oh, I see! Yer's in mournin'! Yer's an orphan, I reckon, honey! Well, dere! I won't talk about it! It only makes fings wuss to talk about it! But I only want to tell yer, honey, as yer'll allus find a friend in me—Winny Wicket! Yes, and in my ole marster, too!" said the woman, with heartfelt sympathy.

"I thank you from my soul," murmured the girl, in a low and broken voice.

"And my ole marster, honey! Oh, I tell yer!"

"I have heard that he was a very good man."

"'Good man!' Why, he's an angel, honey! Just a perfect angel! You'll see! If he can't comfort yer, honey, nobody on dis yeth can! Dat's all I hab got to say! And here comes Hinderer an' de boys wid yer trunk," she added, as footsteps and voices, with an accompaniment of rumbling and bumping along the hall floor, announced the same fact.

Winny Wicket opened the door to admit—first, the colored girl, and then, two boys, bringing a moderately sized traveling trunk between them.

They set it down shyly, glanced with timid curiosity at the young stranger, and then slipped away.

"Now, honey, I's got to go down and 'tend to de breakfas', tickler the coffee. I don't trust nobody to make ole marster's coffee, 'cause ef I did dey'd sure to spile it an' den I should get mad an' fall from grace. An' I don't want to fall from grace on account o' coffee! Not at my age I don't! Is yer got all yer want, honey?"

"Yes, I thank you."

"If you hastn't, jes' you ax my gal for it. An', mind, Hinderer, you 'tend to Miss Bewildin' right and proper, does yer hear?"

"Yes, mammy."

"Well, do it, then."

With these words, Winny Wicket left the room, singing:

"A snare for me has Satan set."

The colored folks were methodistical and musical in this family.

"Will I unstrap your trunk for you, miss?" inquired the colored girl.

"No, thank you—a—what is your name?" gently inquired the young lady.

"Hinda, miss—Hinda Wicket. But mammy calls me Hinderer, and I jes' finks she do it outen aggrawation, I does so."

The young lady made no observation.

"Can I do anything for yer, miss?" inquired the girl.

"No, Hinda. You may go; but please let Mrs. Fleetwood know of my arrival, and say that I am ready to wait on her as soon as she will permit me to do so."

"Yes, miss," said the girl, cheerfully, as she left the room.

Erma Wildering closed and bolted the door after her maid, and then threw herself into a chair and covered her face with her hands.

"Oh, my Lord!" she groaned, from the depths of her soul. "Am I not a wretch to come here? To come here

to this sweet and happy home? To come here with the sword of fate hanging over my head by a single hair? To come here to bring a malediction on the house? Oh, wretch! Oh, traitor! Oh, imposter that I am! Yet, no! Not quite so bad as that, perhaps, or the good old bishop never would have sanctioned my act. Oh, why was I ever born? Why could I not have died in childhood, in happy childhood? Ah! that seems so far away, now! Why could not that horse have killed me? I did hope he was going to do it! But, no; there was no such deliverance for me. Oh, Heaven! Is it wicked to wish for death when life is wrecked? Wrecked for me, and wrecked for him! And he! Oh! he! How breaks the morning to him—'the most unhappy man of men'!" she cried, wringing her hands, and moaning in tearless agony.

A low rap sounded on the door. Low as it was, it startled her and set her trembling. She asked, in a faint voice:

"Who is there?"

"It's me, miss. It's Hinda. Please, miss, dey's all up, an' down in de parlor, an' ole marse an' young miss say how dey will be glad to see yer at yer own conweniency. An' breakfas' will be ready in ten minutes, an' daddy—dat is Uncle Jugurtha—has 'rived safe and fotch de mare home, and told us all 'bout de acc'ent, an' will yer open de door an' let me come in an' help you to dress?"

"No, I thank you, Hinda, it is not necessary. I will be down in a few minutes," Erma replied, in a gentle tone, to the well-meant officiousness of the girl.

When the footsteps had retreated from the door, Erma arose and went to the dressing table, laid off her black bonnet, veil and mantle, and looked in the glass preparatory to making a modest breakfast toilet.

Even she was startled by the reflection of her own face there.

"Oh! what a ghastly death's head is mine to frighten people with! Oh! how can I change it? What shall I do? My face betrays me, if nothing else does. Oh! what shall I do with my blanched skin and hollow eyes? No one will keep me with such a face. Yet, I have to go down presently and meet a strange family circle, who will

be full of curiosity and criticism in regard to their new governess. Ah! why can I not die? Were death the eternal, dreamless sleep that the new philosophers would have us believe, how quickly and how willingly I would lie down to that sleep! Yet—would I? Could I? And he still on earth? I must not think of this, or I shall madden!"

She went and plunged her hands and head in a basin of cold water and bathed them long and well.

Then she made such a simple morning toilet as her means allowed, and went downtsairs to undergo the ordeal of presenting herself to her new employers.

A servant who was waiting in the hall showed her into the morning room.

As she was about to enter, a pleasant picture met her eyes and caused her to pause for a moment on the threshold, and even beguiled her into a slight smile.

About midway in the room stood a family group, facing her.

The central figure was the most attractive there, although it was that of a man of seventy years of age, or more—a tall, spare, well-formed man, of fine, straight, regular features, thin, long face; fresh, clear complexion; blue eyes, pure and bright as those of infancy, and silver-white hair and beard. He wore a dressing gown of purple cashmere, tied around his waist with a cord, and tassels of the same color.

He had evidently just come into the room, for he was surrounded by children and animals, who were all clamoring for notice from the beloved master, and among whom he was "distributing" himself in smiles and caresses, as well as he could.

He held in his arms a fair-haired baby girl, of three or four years old, dressed in a white frock, who was doing as she pleased with his hair and face, sometimes pulling, sometimes kissing, but always smiled on and caressed.

Around the silver and the golden heads of the old man and the little child flew two brown and white pigeons, excited with innocent pigeon love and jealousy, clamorous for attention, and lighting sometimes on the heads and sometimes on the shoulders of the two.

On his right side hung a healthy, blooming girl of

twelve years old, with curling brown hair and merry, brown eyes. She wore a red merino dress with white ruffles around her throat and wrists.

On his left swung a black-haired, black-eyed boy of eight, still in knickerbockers.

Against his ankles a motherly white cat rubbed affectionately.

Right before him stood a greyhound, with his paws upon his master's knees.

All these were pressing their attentions upon him, with a great deal of love and some little jealousy.

On seeing the young lady enter the room he tenderly put the baby girl down on her feet, gently released himself from the others, and smilingly advanced to meet her.

"Miss Wildering?" he said, offering his hand.

"Erma Wildering, sir," she replied, in a low voice.

He turned his head slightly, as if to catch again the notes of the soft, pathetic voice, and then, closing his hand warmly on hers, he added:

"I am very glad to see you, my dear. I hope you have taken no harm from the accident on the road."

"None at all, sir," she replied.

"Yet you must be fatigued with your journey. When you have had breakfast you must lie down and rest, for now I see you need it very much," he concluded, as with old-time courtesy he led the way to an armchair and placed her in it.

Then he beckoned to the brown-eyed girl and boy to approach.

"Here are your young charges, my dear; but you must not trouble yourself with them for at least a week to come; not until you have recovered from your fatigue and become familiar with your home. This girl is Fleurie, my niece, or, rather, grandniece. This boy is Eustice, her brother. My children, this young lady is your governess, whom we have all been expecting with so much pleasure," said the old gentleman, presenting the girl and boy.

"I hope we shall soon be good friends, my dears," said Erma, offering a hand to each of the young ones, and drawing them reluctantly toward her; for the girl was

shy, and the boy was awkward, and both hung back, and he whispered an audible question to his sister.

"Is she a widow?"

Erma started and dropped his hand, for her quick ears had caught the sense of the inquiry.

Mr. Gladden's had not, but he saw the embarrassment of the three, and he said, with a smile:

"Ah! well! You will know and like each other better soon, I feel sure."

At this moment two ladies entered the room, walking together with their arms around each other's waists. They were dressed alike, in blue cashmere morning dresses, with embroidered white cambric chemisettes and undersleeves; but they were not at all alike in person.

One was of medium height, plump and rosy, with merry, brown eyes and curling brown hair—evidently the young widowed mother of the three children who so much resembled her.

The other was a tall, thin, fair woman, with light, flaxen hair, and sharp features, and small, steel-gray eyes. She was not decidedly plain, yet she was not prepossessing, though apparently a great favorite with her companion.

"My niece, Mrs. Fleetwood. Her friend, Miss Mesh," said Mr. Gladden, presenting the two ladies.

Erma Wildering arose and courtesied.

Mrs. Fleetwood frankly gave her hand, and warmly welcomed the young stranger.

Miss Mesh followed her example.

"And now, my dears, let us go to breakfast. This dear girl has been traveling day and night for I know not how long. She much needs refreshment and rest. She ought not to have left her room, indeed, this morning. I wish she had gone to bed and had her breakfast brought to her," said Clement Gladden, as he gave his arm to the stranger to lead her to the breakfast room.

"Are you so very much exhausted, my dear?" inquired Mrs. Fleetwood, turning her kind brown eyes on Erma. "But there! Your poor face answers for you. You shall retire to rest immediately after breakfast."

Clement Gladden opened the door in the rear of the parlor and led the stranger into the adjoining room,

where he seated her at the table. They were followed by the whole family, who speedily took their places.

The girl, Fleurie, slipped into a chair beside Erma, put her hand into the stranger's and whispered:

"I love you."

Erma answered by squeezing the little, fat hand.

"I love 'oo, too," cooed the four-year-old baby, who sat on Erma's other side and watched her with clear, kind, light-blue eyes.

"And so do I, only I don't make a fuss about it like girls do!" jealously observed Master Eustace, who sat on the opposite side of the table, but whose watchful eyes and quick ears had detected all this sly love making.

Fleurie flushed and fidgeted with all the awkward shyness of her age; but the baby girl glared defiance from her innocent blue eyes.

"I think we shall all love Miss Wildering," said their mother, with a smile.

Mr. Gladden was bent on carving the cold roast pheasant that was placed before him, and serving it to the company by the hands of Aquilo, or "Quil," the bright-eyed negro boy.

Erma, in gratitude for all the interest taken in her, for all the kindness shown her, tried to make a tolerable breakfast; but she was glad when the ordeal was over and she was free to leave the table and retire to her room.

Mrs. Fleetwood accompanied her to make sure that she had every needful comfort. She did not stay to talk, but soon left the wearied one to repose.

As Mrs. Fleetwood left the room she was beckoned by Miss Mesh.

"Come into my apartment—I wish to speak to you," said Miss Mesh.

Mrs. Fleetwood followed the speaker into the handsomest spare room in the house, a spacious chamber, upholstered in crimson and gold, which had been assigned to the guest, Miss Mesh.

"Who is this girl, or woman?" inquired Miss Mesh, as soon as the two ladies were seated together before a glowing coal fire in the polished steel grate.

"She is—Miss Wildering," replied Mrs. Fleetwood,

opening her brown eyes wide at the question and the way in which it was put.

"Are you quite sure of that?" inquired Miss Mesh, ironically.

"Why, yes."

"Then I am not. I am not sure that she is Miss Wildering, or Miss anything else!"

"Why, Ada Mesh; what do you mean?"

"Susan Fleetwood, there is something very strange about this woman; very mysterious, very suspicious, if you must have my meaning!"

"But why in the world should you think so?"

"Her looks, for one thing. She looks for all the world as if she had something very heavy on her mind or conscience—as if she was constantly fearing some misfortune or discovery."

"I observed nothing of the sort. I saw only the sorrow of bereavement and the timidity of youth."

"There is something radically wrong there, believe me."

"How can there be? You know the circumstances of her engagement. I wanted a teacher to civilize my little savages. Capt. Blantyre and Uncle Clement had been lecturing me for months about the duty of engaging a governess. So, at last, I consented that uncle should write to his old friend, Bishop Whiting, to find a competent person for us. And the bishop writes an answer, and warmly recommends this young lady——"

"Yes, and if I recollect rightly, he contrives to say very little about her."

"All he says is to the purpose, however. Let us see, now. I happen to have his letter in my pocket."

"Let us hear it, then."

Mrs. Fleetwood drew forth the bishop's letter, unfolded and ran her eyes over it and said:

"Well, after acknowledging uncle's letter, and so forth, here is what he says about Miss Wildering:

" 'I have known Erma Wildering from her childhood to the present time. I knew her first as an exemplary Sunday-school pupil, afterward as a faithful Sunday-school teacher. She has been a communicant of our church since her fourteenth year, and a consistent Christian ever. She is unusually well educated for a girl, having been well

grounded in English literature, mathematics and modern languages. In a word, she is eminently well fitted for the situation you wish to fill.'

"There!" exclaimed Mrs. Fleetwood, as she folded and replaced the letter; "what more could the bishop have said than that?"

"A great deal more, I think. He might have told us whether she was a lady, which he certainly has not done. He might have told us whether Erma Wildering were Miss or Mrs. Wildering, which he has evaded."

"Ada, how can you be so suspicious? Of course, she is Miss Wildering. If the bishop did not so designate her in his letter, it was, of course, because, having known her so intimately from childhood, he had been accustomed to call her Erma."

"Hum! Maybe so. But why didn't he tell us something about her family? He has not said one word about her family."

"Well, I acknowledge that was an omission; but, of course, he either forgot or thought it unnecessary to do so."

"Hum!" said Ada Mesh again. "She met with an adventure on the road, didn't she?"

"Yes, but you will not bring up that against her. The fault was old Jugurtha's, not hers."

"Who was it that came to her assistance and brought her home?"

Mrs. Fleetwood hesitated and looked really afraid to answer; but on Miss Mesh repeating the question she unwillingly replied:

"Rodolph Wolfsohn."

"Rodolph Wolfsohn!"

"Well, yes."

"Roldolph Wolfsohn!"

"Yes, I say. It could not be helped, I suppose. Desperate cases require desperate remedies," rather sulkily replied Mrs. Fleetwood.

"Well! That any decent woman should permit any strange man to get into a carriage with her alone at night, to drive through fifteen or twenty miles of wilderness, passes my imagination; but that this girl should permit Rodolph Wolfsohn to do so——"

"Now, how could Erma Wildering have known anything about that man? Besides, if she had she could not have helped herself. Let us drop the subject, Ada. I have to go now and see to uncle," said Mrs. Fleetwood, as she arose and left the room.

Erma Wildering did not reappear in the family circle that day. She slept the sleep of prostration until sunset, when she awoke and rang her bell.

Hinda answered it, with a message from the kind-hearted Mrs. Fleetwood, to the effect that she must not think of rising until the next morning, and that her tea could be sent up to her.

The still weary girl returned a message of gratitude and again resigned herself to rest.

On the next morning Erma Wildering awoke, much recovered and refreshed in mind and body, more grateful to God and man than she had lately felt, more firmly braced, too, to live a life and dare a future full of terror and destitute of hope.

She made a careful toilet and a cheerful one for the children's sake—a white serge morning dress, trimmed with black ribbon.

She had just come down, when she met Aquilo in the hall.

"Please, miss, dere is a man a-waitin' for yer in de back parlor."

"A man!" gasped Erma, reeling back and grasping the banisters for support.

"Yes, miss, a man. In de back parlor. Ole marse, nor none of um, ain't come down yet—it is too airly; but dat man has been waitin' for yer ebber so long," replied the boy, and he passed on to his work.

"Run to earth! Run to earth!" cried the girl, in an agony of despair, wildly wringing her hands. "Run to earth sooner than I thought!"

CHAPTER III.

THE RECLUSE OF DARKWOOD.

This should have been a noble creature,
With all the energy that would have made
A goodly frame of glorious elements,
Had they been wisely mingled; as it is,
He is an awful chaos—light and darkness,
And mind and dust, and passions and pure thoughts,
Mixed and contending, without end or order—
All dormant or destructive; he will perish,
And yet he must not. Such are worth redemption.
—BYRON.

Pale—but she was always pale—trembling, yet with desperate resolution, Erma Wildering arose, steadied herself, and passed into the morning room to meet, as she thought, the unavoidable crisis of her fate.

The windows were all wide open; the room was flooded with light, and in the midst of it stood the slight, dark, graceful figure of a man, with his face shaded by a soft, black felt hat.

Erma looked at him, started, seemed surprised, then perplexed, and finally, breathed a sigh of deep relief as she advanced and held out her hand to the stranger, saying, with a voice still vibrating with excitement:

"You, Mr. Wolfsohn? I thought—I thought——"

"To find some more privileged visitor, doubtless," said the young man, as he lifted his shadowy hat and bowed.

"I am very glad to see you," she answered, politely and very sincerely; for it was such a relief—such a reprieve—to see him, or anyone there, instead of the visitor she had dreaded.

"Thanks. I was out with my gun and dogs early this morning, and being so near the house, I could not refrain from calling to inquire how you were recovered from the fatigue of your journey—and accident," he formally explained, while gazing steadily on her face with eyes like two burning stars—eyes whose fire she could scarcely bear.

"You are very kind, and I am quite well; thanks," she answered, looking down.

"I hope the servant did not disturb you for me. I

merely stopped to inquire after you without the hope of seeing you at so early an hour—though I need not say it is a great happiness to do so," he said, in a manner much too earnest for the occasion, and with his dark, dilated, starry orbs still devouring her beauty.

"No; I was coming downstairs when Aquilo told me that a gentleman was waiting here to see me, and I thought—I thought—it was some one else," murmured Erma, with her eyes still on the floor.

"Some one whom you would like better to have seen," commented the visitor, in a low, slow, complaining voice, which he had no right to employ, and keeping his great, burning eyes still fixed upon her lowered face—his strange earnestness seeming to be too native to the man, too involuntary, to be consciously offensive. "You are disappointed. You expected to find some one here whom you wished to see."

"Oh, no, indeed, I did not," answered Erma, impulsively, not reflecting what construction might be put upon her hasty words.

"I am glad of that!" exclaimed Rodolph Wolfsohn, and he smiled radiantly.

"Will you not take a seat, sir? Mr. Gladden will be down presently," said Erma; for they had been standing facing each other all this time.

"No, thanks. I am an intruder here; an unexpected and undesired one; only called to inquire after your health. I must go now, leaving my best wishes with that blundering boy who brought about this short interview with you—a delight that I did not anticipate nor deserve."

He had just said he must go, yet he went not then. There he stood.

Erma, raising her eyes for an instant, in one swift glance saw what she had not noticed during her dark night ride with him, or even on their hurried arrival at Brighthome by daylight.

It was an air of poverty, of deep privation, of actual want, in this handsome and distinguished looking man —for not only was his black felt hat rusty, and his gray hunting suit quite threadbare, but there was a pinched and hungry look in the dark, hollow face and great cavernous eyes.

Pity—not akin to contempt, such as one feels for imbecility, but pity related to admiration, such as one feels for heroism in misfortune—filled the soul of Erma, as she dropped her eyes and repeated:

"I think you had better be seated, sir. Mr. Gladden——"

"Mr. Gladden is here, my dear. Good-morning. I hope you feel better to-day," said the cheery voice of the old master of the house, as he entered with his fresh, genial face beaming, his silver-white hair and beard afloat over the shoulders and bosom of his purple gown, the baby girl, Fance, in his arms, and the two pigeons whirling in little circles around him, and pecking at each other in harmless strife for a perching place on his head.

"Ah, Mr. Wolfsohn! This is a pleasant surprise, indeed! I am very glad to see you. It is a long time since I have had that happiness. You have been absent from the neighborhood, I believe?" said Mr. Gladden, as he put down the child and cordially clasped the hand of the visitor.

"Yes, I have been away, Mr. Gladden, and returned only yesterday morning," said the young man, with a bow.

"When you were so good as to render a valuable service to my young friend here——"

"Say, 'so fortunate as to render a slight one,' Mr. Gladden."

"At all events, I am very happy in having this opportunity of expressing our thanks."

"Pray, say no more about it, sir. Being out early this morning with my gun, and straying near the house, I only dropped in to inquire after Miss Wildering's health."

"And now that you are here, you must stay and breakfast with us. No! but I will take no denial!" he added, as he saw the young man ready to raise an objection. "We are neighbors who have not been neighborly, Wolfsohn. That is all wrong—all wrong; we must be more sociable in future, Rodolph! Your father's son——"

"But my habiliments, sir!" interrupted the young man, glancing down at his threadbare gray suit and his well-worn boots.

"Tut! tut! What have they got to do with the question?"

"I am scarcely in trim to appear before ladies."

"Pooh! pooh! My ladies are simple country women who will not expect gentlemen visitors—particularly when they are old neighbors—to pay their respects in court dresses," said Mr. Gladden, as he rang a bell, which Quil immediately answered.

"Take this gentleman's game bag and gun and show him into the hall bedroom," he added, as the boy stood "at attention" waiting orders.

Rodolph Wolfsohn still hesitated, until, catching a glance from Erma's eyes, and reading there a latent interest and sympathy, he smiled, handed over his equipments to the waiter, and followed him from the room.

"You will find us still here when you return, Wolfsohn," said Mr. Gladden.

Aquilo conducted the unexpected guest to a little room in the rear of the hall, especially set apart for the impromptu toilets of gentlemen visitors, and supplied with water, towels, clothes brooms and hair brushes.

When Wolfsohn returned to the morning parlor, he found the whole family assembled for breakfast.

He was duly presented to Mrs. Fleetwood, who received him very cordially, and to Miss Mesh, who drew herself up and nodded coldly.

They soon went into the breakfast room and gathered around the table.

The social meal passed very cheerfully.

They thought their guest would have volunteered some information about his six months' absence from home; but, as he did not, their curiosity remained unsatisfied, for Mr. Gladden would not, and they dared not, question him on the subject.

When breakfast was over he returned with the family to their morning room, where he remained talking with them for a few moments longer, still without mentioning the motive of his journey, or the cause of his long absence.

Finally he took leave, then reclaimed his sportsman's equipments from Aquilo, and walked away with his game bag on his side and his gun over his shoulder.

As soon as he was gone a chorus of voices opened.

"What a strange man!" said Ada Mesh.

"I can't think why he should have ventured here to breakfast with us this morning, poor soul!" said Mrs. Fleetwood.

"He come to see how our young friend fared after her accident. I then invited him to stay," Mr. Gladden explained.

"Oh! uncle, was that wisely done?" questioned Mrs. Fleetwood.

"Why not, my dear?"

"The poor soul bears such a reputation!"

"Undeserved, as far as evil speaking goes, I think, my dear."

"Well, Heaven knows I should be glad to think well of him!" said Susan Fleetwood, sincerely.

"Then do so, my dear. Think well of him. What do we really know against him, except his poverty and voluntary seclusion from the world? And that should not count against him."

"Oh! uncle, they say he squandered his property in riotous living."

"Mere thoughtless gossip, my dear."

"And then he has such an evil name among women. Oh! uncle, that is the worst of all! You know it is said that he is really answerable for the death of that distracted girl who committed suicide by drowning herself last spring."

"Do not believe one word of that, Susan. If there had been the least foundation for that story, it would have come out at the coroner's inquest."

"But, uncle, they say he went away, and stayed away, to avoid being called as a witness at that inquest, where he would have been obliged to criminate himself indirectly, or to commit perjury."

"Susan, my dear, this is dreadful, you see! People's gossip. I do suppose they mean no great harm, and do not know all the evil done by their foolish chatter. But, Susan, do you think he would have deemed it necessary to stay away six months in order to escape the coroner's inquest that sat on the first day of his departure? The idea is absurd, you see, my dear."

"Oh! but, uncle, they say he stayed away also to be out of reach during the trial of those road robbers who were sent to the State's prison last summer. Uncle," she continued, dropping her voice to a whisper, "they do say that Rodolph Wolfsohn was captain of the whole band; that his old house in the swamp was their rendezvous, and that that was the reason why he lived so secluded. And they say his comrades loved him so well that not one of them would betray him on their trial."

"And has it come to this?" said Clement Gladden, solemnly; "has it come to this, that the proud, shy, impoverished heir of Darkwood should have his name associated with those of gamblers, robbers, destroyers of innocence and with all other most revolting criminals that a corrupt civilization has evolved? Susan! Susan! I tell you there is not a word of truth in all this."

"Indeed! I should be glad to believe so; yet that is what people say of him," sighed Mrs. Fleetwood.

"Yes, and it shows what a rolling ball slander is, gathering as it goes. The poor, young man came into a property heavily burdened with debt. He has lived the life of a hermit, of an anchorite, denying himself the common comforts, yes, the very decencies of life, that he may clear the old homestead and the remnant of the family estate from debt. He has lived alone, avoiding society. The world—the very obscure little world to which we belong—ignorant of his real and honorable motives for this singular life, have ascribed false and disgraceful ones to him. People have imagined, and reported, and exaggerated these stories until they have increased at a compound-interest rate; now there is no evil too great to be ascribed to the Recluse of Darkwood and 'no man so poor as to do him reverence.' Happily for him, he does not dream of the bad odor in which he lives. He hears and sees nothing of it; for, you may be sure, his boldest traducer would be very cautious of treating him with open disrespect."

"No one could do that. There is something about the young man which forbids that. Something that wins—not perfect confidence, perhaps, but, certainly, good-will. Even I, who disapproved of him, could not help treating

him with affection and respect," Mrs. Fleetwood admitted.

"Continue to treat him so; for I have invited him to visit us often. I am glad he has returned to this neighborhood. I am glad that he happened to help Miss Wildering at need, and came here this morning to inquire after her. I hope he will come often. I hope there is an attraction here that will draw him," concluded the old gentleman, turning with a beaming smile toward Erma Wildering.

The young governess had been an interested listener to the conversation, but had taken no part in it.

She was surprised at herself to find how much pain and pleasure the argument gave her; how piqued she felt with Mrs. Fleetwood for repeating the bitter slanders that lady had heard circulated against the character of the recluse; how grateful she felt to Mr. Gladden for defending that character, and, above all, she wondered much that it should hurt her more to hear this man called "poor soul" and "poor fellow" in a tone of pity, than to hear him called worse names in a tone of reprobation. Probably this was because she felt sure that he could not possibly be a villain; but not so sure he might not be a poor soul.

"Now, uncle, have you got through lecturing?" inquired Miss Fleurie.

"Yes, my dear—why?"

"Because if you have, as there are to be no lessons until next week, I want to take Miss Wildering out and show her the garden, the shrubbery, the orchard and the vineyard, and also the poultry, dogs and horses!"

"Quite right, my dear; if Miss Wildering cares to go," said the old gentleman.

"And I want to show her my rabbit warren and my pigeon boxes," said Eustace.

"An' me, my baby houdees and dollies, and my tat and tittens," chimed in little Fance.

"Very well, my children; show Miss Wildering all your treasurers, if they will interest her. Susan, my dear, I am going to ride over to Blantyre to welcome the captain home. Have you any message?"

"No, sir; not likely," said the pretty widow, with a

flush that betrayed more of her real feelings than she had cared to show.

The old gentleman went out to order his horse.

The young people carried off Erma Wildering a docile captive.

Mrs. Fleetwood and Miss Mesh were left alone in the morning room.

"What do you think of my uncle's new freak of taking up this unhappy young Wolfsohn?" inquired Susan Fleetwood, as they sat knitting side by side.

"What do I think of it? Why, that it is a piece of childishness which he will repent as long as he lives. You know what I think of Mr. Gladden himself—that he is a great, big, old baby, with about as much knowledge of men and manners as your own little Fance. If you don't take care, he will bring ruin on you and yours by his eccentricities."

"I cannot bear to hear you speak in that way of my dear uncle."

"Then you ought not to have asked my opinion—which you did, you know. And really, now, this is not a house in which I should advise any woman to bring up her children. The old gentleman is much too odd in his ways. His very engagement of this strange Wildering woman, of whom we know next to nothing, is an instance. His taking up this young vagrant of Darkwood, whom every other decent family has dropped, is another."

"It is his boundless charity. Ada Mesh, I will never ask your opinion of my uncle's actions again!" exclaimed Susan Fleetwood, warmly.

"Pray do not, my dear; unless you wish to hear unpleasant truths," said Miss Mesh, as she stooped and picked up something that had just caught her eye on the floor.

"Some one has dropped her pocket handkerchief," she said, spreading the little square of fine linen out upon her lap and beginning to examine it with that all-devouring curiosity that extended from the smallest matter to the greatest.

"It belongs to one of the children. Never mind it," said Mrs. Fleetwood, impatiently.

"No, it doesn't belong to one of the children, either,"

replied Miss Mesh, holding it up and peering at the initials worked in black silk in one corner. "It belongs to the Wildering girl. Here are her initials, 'E. W.'—and oh! see, here is another letter picked out, but the needle holes are left. Did you ever? Three letters, and one picked out! Now, what can that third letter be?" said Miss Mesh, holding the handkerchief up to the window and squinting at the mark.

"Oh, what does it matter? I would not have so much curiosity about other people as you have, for a great deal. What does it signify?" exclaimed Mrs. Fleetwood.

"It signifies a great deal, let me tell you. It signifies that your fine, new governess is not all she pretends to be!" triumphantly replied the mischief-maker. "And now I have the third letter, that was picked out! It is 'H.' Look! 'E. W. H.' Now, what does that mean? Erma Wildering H. Now, what does 'H.' stand for?"

Mrs. Fleetwood came and looked at the initials on the handkerchief, and could not deny the statement of Miss Mesh.

"But what of it, after all? The handkerchief may not be her own; it may have been left to her. And E. W. might stand for Ellen Wilson, or Edith Watson, or some other name, and the H. might have been picked out to make the other letters suit for her own. You would never raise a suspicion of a young lady recommended by a bishop, upon no better foundation than the initials on a handkerchief, would you?"

"I don't know but I would, when taken with other circumstances."

"Ada Mesh, I would not be as suspicious as you are for all the wealth of this world! Now, please excuse me, for I have got to go and talk to Winny Wicket about dinner. I don't doubt but Capt. Blantyre will come home with uncle."

And so saying, Mrs. Fleetwood left the room.

"I have got a clew, and I will follow it," said Miss Mesh, as she slipped the handkerchief into her pocket. "It shall go hard, but I will find what this picked-out letter H. stands for, and then, perhaps, I shall be able to unmask this impostor."

CHAPTER IV.

GLADDEN, OF BRIGHTHOME.

All who approach him by that spell are bound,
Which nobler natures weave themselves around;
Those stars which make their own charmed atmosphere—
Not wholly love, yet more of love than fear;—
A mystic influence which, we know not why,
Makes some on earth a portion of our sky.
—THE NEW TIMON.

The Gladdens, of Brighthome, had been proprietors of the estate for more than two centuries.

Clement Gladden, the present master, had built his beautiful, modern house on a new part of the property, among the finest of the forest-covered hills, and had called it "Brighthome."

Clement Gladden had been an only child, and he was now a childless widower, having in the early years of his happy, married life lost wife and children by a catastrophe.

A rare, living Christian faith had then supported him under the heavy bereavement; but he had never even dreamed of the possibility of a second marriage and another family.

He had no near relations of his own; but about three years previous to the opening of this story Providence favored him with a domestic circle.

It happened in this manner:

Francis Fleetwood, a wealthy banker of Mobile, twin-brother of his late wife, had died of lingering fever, and left a young widow and three children in very affluent circumstances.

Mobile had become hateful to her as the scene of much sickness and sorrow; so, for the sake of her children's health and the total change needful for them all, she accepted the cordial invitation of Mr. Gladden and went to Brighthome to spend the first year of her widowhood.

Mr. Gladden was much older than the pretty widow, and he always spoke of her as his "niece," and Mrs. Fleetwood very naturally fell into the habit of calling him "uncle."

The hearty welcome she received, the constant affection that surrounded her, the purity of the air that revived them all, the freedom of the country life that delighted the children, all combined to make her like the place so well that she had remained at Brighthome ever since.

Clement Gladden loved her well, and loved her children even better; but he loved the baby-girl, Frances, best of all.

Little France was like her father and that father's twin-sister, after both of whom she had been named. France looked at him with the pure, blue, loving eyes of his own ascended Fanny; perhaps that was the reason why he loved the child so devotedly.

She returned his affection with full measure. Love bestowed on little children or innocent dumb animals is never ill requited, never lost.

Clement Gladden might often be seen, in his long, purple gown, with Baby France in his arms, her chubby hands patting his face or playing with his silver hair.

Little France was four years old now, and her mother had been at Brighthome three years.

A change had come over the pretty widow within the last six months.

This change had been effected by the advent of a certain Capt. Russel Blantyre, of Blantyre House. He was a tall and fine-looking blond bachelor of forty, who had recently resigned his commission in the navy to retire on his patrimonial estate of Blantyre, which was within a few miles of Brighthome.

He resumed his acquaintance with Clement Gladden, which had dated from his boyhood to the year when, fired by a passion for the sea, young Blantyre had insisted on being sent to Annapolis to become a naval officer.

He had had enough of it, apparently, in twenty-five years' service, and now, at the age of forty, had returned to his native place to wander away no more.

Within the last few months he had been very frequent in his visits to Brighthome—visits that could scarcely be attributed to any attractions less potent than those of the pretty and well-dowered young widow.

Susan Fleetwood, on her side, was not indifferent to the attentions of the gallant captain.

She was a healthy, happy, warm-hearted young woman, whose first marriage had been contracted, when she was a girl of seventeen, with a rich banker of fifty, and who now remembered her late husband with much respect and affection, but without the slightest intention of wearing weeds forever in his honor.

So she favored the suit of Capt. Blantyre.

Clement Gladden was too just to object to this state of things, especially as he could find no fault with his neighbor.

Capt. Blantyre was received at Brighthome as the approved lover of Susan Fleetwood. To be sure, he had not yet proposed; but then it is a noteworthy fact that the less time men have, the longer they take to make up their minds; and, in this case, it was equally certain that, sooner or later, this man would do so.

Meanwhile, however, the young widow's children had been growing up without education.

Mr. Gladden had expostulated with their mother. So had Capt. Blantyre, in view of his prospective duties toward them as stepfather.

Two results had ensued upon Mrs. Fleetwood's consent to engage a governess.

First, the widow herself had written to an old schoolmate, Miss Ada Mesh, the eldest daughter in a large family of narrow means, to try and find her a suitable teacher.

Miss Mesh had answered that letter in person, volunteering a long visit to Mrs. Fleetwood at Brighthome, and secretly hoping that the visit might end in her permanent engagement as resident governess at such an attractive place.

But as Miss Mesh's education was of the most superficial character, it was seen that she was totally unfit for the responsible situation, and thus all her hints toward an engagement were so politely ignored that she could not venture to make an open proposal to be met by a positive refusal, which would render her longer stay at delightful Brighthome undesirable, if not impossible.

Secondly, Mr. Gladden had also written to his friend, Bishop Whiting, to find a governess for the children, and had received the letter warmly recommending Erma Wildering.

On the first of October Erma Wildering was engaged, and on the seventh, as we have seen, she was welcomed in person at Brighthome.

From that time Ada Mesh became her enemy, bent upon her ruin.

How keen-eyed are the furious sisters, envy, hatred and malice! All three possessed and instigated Ada Mesh in her secret investigations into Erma Wildering's past.

There was a mystery—of deathless sorrow and burning shame—in this girl's life, and Ada Mesh had with demoniac subtlety detected that there was—by slightest trifles, only significant to sharp-visioned jealousy on the watch for evidence.

The absence in the bishop's commendatory letter of all mention of her family, the omission of any distinctive title of Miss or Mrs. in naming Erma Wildering, the pallor and despair in the girl's face—not to be sufficiently explained by any mere bereavement by death as indicated in her deep mourning dress—but reserve in regard to her own personal relations and antecedents, and, finally, the discovery of the handkerchief with Erma Wildering's two initials worked in the corner, and the third initial—the letter H—picked out.

All these, to a frank and unsuspicious mind, would have seemed, indeed,

"Trifles light as air."

But to Ada's jealous and malignant spirit they were

"Confirmation strong
As proof from Holy Writ,"

of something hideous in the life of Erma Wildering—some horrible and degrading mystery—that Miss Mesh would make it her own proper business to discover and expose.

She was on the watch.

At length her opportunity came.

It was on the first Monday after the arrival of the governess.

Mrs. Fleetwood was entertaining Capt. Blantyre in the parlor.

Erma Wildering was organizing her little school in a

rear room on the ground floor appropriated to the purpose.

Mr. Gladden was taking a ride over to Darkwood to rouse up the recluse there.

Miss Mesh had the upper part of the house to herself and the servant who was collecting the clothes from the several rooms for the weekly wash.

Miss Mesh, lying in ambush within some vacant room, contrived to come out in the hall and meet Hinda Wicket as the latter emerged from Miss Wildering's chamber with a small, white bundle in her hand.

"Ah, Hinda, I wished to see you. Will you just go up into the attic and look for my little, net shawl, which I must have dropped while I was up there putting away my summer clothes? Pray look for it until you find it, Hinda, for I want it to go into the wash this week. You can leave your bundle here, you know."

"Very well, miss," replied the colored girl, putting down the little parcel, and turning to go up the stairs leading to the attic.

As soon as she was out of sight, Miss Mesh sat down in a chair, and took the bundle upon her lap and began to untie it.

She examined the garments one by one.

Every article was marked E. W. H., with the last letter picked out, and so nearly obliterated that only the sharp eyes of suspicion could have detected the marks of the picking.

"It is lucky I found that handkerchief last week, and very lucky that I have got a sight of these before they are washed. They have never been in the water since the letters have been picked out, or the marks of the needle would have been shrunk up and smoothed over by the washing and ironing. Hey! What is this?" She suddenly caught her breath as she looked at a faded name that had been written with indelible ink on the inside of a little white linen collar.

She gazed at the name, while a smile of malicious triumph lighted up her sharp, sallow face.

"Ha! This has been forgotten, or more likely entirely overlooked, it seems so nearly faded out! What will Susan Fleetwood say to this, I wonder?"

She crammed the linen collar into her pocket, and hastily tied up the bundle again, for she heard the voice of Hinda singing in the passage overhead, and knew that she was on her way downstairs.

"Can't find that net shawl o' your'n nowheres, Miss Mesh. Reckon some o' dem dere tryin', aggravatin' chillun must 'a' got hold of it. 'Clare to goodness, old marse do 'dulge dem chillun so much dere won't be no libin' in de same house wid 'em by and by," said Hinda, as she tripped downstairs.

"He's ruining them, certainly," replied Miss Mesh, who would have liked to see the little ones restrained by severest discipline. "But never mind about the shawl now, Hinda. We haven't time to search for it."

"I know dat 'vokin' Rooster's hid it somewhere jus' out'n debiltry," concluded the girl, as she picked up the bundle, added it to a half a dozen others in a large clothes-basket, shouldered the whole burden, and walked off with it.

Miss Mesh went downstairs with her prize, to wait for an opportunity of showing it to Mrs. Fleetwood.

She had to wait a good while, for Mrs. Fleetwood had by this time gone out to ride with Capt. Blantyre.

Miss Mesh was so exalted by her discovery that she could settle herself to nothing. She walked up and down the parlor floor, and occasionally took out the collar and gazed at the name, then with a grim smile replaced it in her pocket, and went to the window to look out and see if the riding party were returning.

Time passed and her impatience increased.

The dinner hour approached, which she knew would bring them home, for Capt. Blantyre was to dine at Brighthome that day, to meet Mr. Wolfsohn, whom Mr. Gladden had gone to Darkwood to fetch.

They kept the old-fashioned early hours at Brighthome; breakfasting at seven o'clock, dining at one, and supping at 7 P. M.

At length Ada Mesh thought she would kill some of the time by dressing for dinner while they were gone, so as to be at full liberty to seek Susan Fleetwood in her own chamber, and make the important revelation, while the pretty widow was at her own toilet.

She gave a last glance at the front windows, but seeing no sign of the returning party, she flew upstairs to her room and made as careful a toilet as she could do in a hurry, powdered her pale face, touched the wasted cheeks with rouge, and the bald eyebrows with sepia, crimped the flaxen hair, and then changed her wrapper of blue cashmere for a dress of cheap, thin, blue silk, with machine lace collar and cuffs, and French "pearl" earrings and pin.

before she had put the finishing touch on her costume she heard the clatter of horses' hoofs, and looking out, saw Mrs. Fleetwood and Capt. Blantyre ride up to the door.

She thought how handsome Susan looked in her close-fitting habit of crimson cloth, and her black felt riding cap, with its crimson feather, and how happy she looked in the conscious conquest of her gallant cavalier, and muttered to herself:

"And we are both of the same age, yet see the difference!"

After all, good people should have the greatest charity for evil-doers. Their greater trials and temptations are so often at fault.

As Ada Mesh watched Blantyre spring from his horse, and give his hand to his companion to lift her from her saddle, she noticed a light in the gay captain's eyes and a flush upon the pretty widow's cheeks that told the story of their *tête-à-tête* ride, and said as plainly as words could speak:

"It is all settled. We are betrothed."

A groom, who rode up two minutes behind them, took both horses to lead to the stable.

The lovers entered the house.

Mrs. Fleetwood came tripping up the stairs on her way to her own apartment.

Miss Mesh knew the custom of the house, and knew as well as if she had seen him go that Capt. Blantyre had gone into the gentleman's hall room to refresh his toilet.

Miss Mesh went out to meet Mrs. Fleetwood at the head of the stairs.

"Sue, dear, may I come in and speak to you, while you are dressing?"

"Certainly, Ada," replied the widow, who was just then too happy to have refused a much more unreasonable request.

They went together into Mrs. Fleetwood's room.

The latter rang her bell, and began hastily to take off her gloves and hat, saying:

"We are late; it is a quarter to one. I must dress quickly to be in time for dinner. What a barbarity to have dinner in the middle of the day! But there, I must hurry."

"You need not do so, Susan. Mr. Gladden has not yet returned from his ride, and he will have to change his dress when he comes," said Miss Mesh, while Mrs. Fleetwood was hastily taking off her riding habit.

At this moment Hinda appeared, in answer to the lady's ring.

"Send her away as soon as ever you can. I have something very important to tell you," whispered Miss Mesh.

Mrs. Fleetwood's brown eyes opened wide in surprise and curiosity, and then she nodded, and turning to the maid, gave orders:

"Hinda, lay out my crimson moire antique and point lace set, and the pearl and ruby jewelry. Then take my riding habit downstairs and brush it well. You need not return. Miss Mesh will help me to dress."

"Very well, ma'am," replied the colored girl, a little jealous, as she obeyed orders and left the room.

Susan Fleetwood bathed her face in a hurry, and while drying it on a fine damask towel, she looked attentively at Miss Mesh, and inquired:

"Is the light good in your room, Ada?"

"Yes, dear—why?"

"Because—because—there is a black speck on your forehead; go to the glass and see," replied the blooming widow, suppressing an inclination to smile.

Miss Mesh went to the glass on the dressing table between the two tall, front windows, and looked in vain for the black speck. There was no such thing to be seen. But she found—what Mrs. Fleetwood had good-naturedly intended to call her attention to, in this delicate way—her face too thickly covered with white powder, that showed

itself in the edges of her eyebrows and eyelashes, in the corners of her mouth and the curves of her nose.

She went over this field carefully with a cambric handkerchief, and inquired:

"Is the speck gone?"

"Quite gone," replied the widow, smiling.

"Ah, it is well enough for you to laugh! you, with your dimpled face and healthy bloom; but for me, with my complexion ruined by our detestable climate—and we of the same age, too!" said Miss Mesh, irrelevantly.

"Poor, dear Ada! It was the farthest possible from my intention to laugh at you. And indeed I don't think I did laugh at all! You must never go back to Mobile again, Ada! You must live here in this breezy Brighthome, and you will recover your own bloom. See what this air has done for me in three years!" said Susan Fleetwood, affectionately. Her happiness had made the goodhearted little woman even more amiable than ever.

"I should like to know how I am to stay here in any case, and particularly if you should go away, as I suspect you will shortly," said Miss Mesh, only half mollified.

Mrs. Fleetwood paused with the brush in her hand—for she had been brushing out her long, brown hair—reflected for a few moments, and then said:

"How I wish you would set your cap at uncle and marry him! or if you would not like to do that, you must come to me—if I go!" she added, as if suddenly recollecting that she had admitted too much.

"'If you go!' I guess there's no doubt about that. The only question is how soon you will go," replied Miss Mesh.

"I don't know myself, Ada. But I think I have sponged upon uncle long enough. Now, never mind me. Tell me what you have to communicate," said Mrs. Fleetwood, as she seated herself before her dressing glass and began to plait the long tresses of her smooth brown hair.

"Look here!" said Miss Mesh, drawing a little, white strip from her pocket, and holding it before the eyes of the widow.

"What is it?" inquired the latter.

"A linen collar that I picked up in the passage."

"Whose is it?"

"Miss Wildering's."

"Dear me! What a habit that young woman has of molting her feathers all over the house! Well, you had better give it to Hinda to take to its owner, or put in the wash," said Mrs. Fleetwood, whose busy fingers were still running rapidly down the long tresses of her hair, twisting them into braids.

"But I wish you to examine it first."

"Why? I don't wish to examine it. I want you to tell me that secret you had to tell."

"This is the secret."

"That!" exclaimed the widow, opening her brown eyes widely.

"Yes, Susan. Look at this name. Look at it! If this is not a revelation, I do not know what would be!"

Mrs. Fleetwood hastily knotted the end of her braid to keep it from coming out, and then leaving it hanging, she took the little, limp collar and scrutinized the name.

"E. W. Haynes. Is that it?" she inquired, raising her eyes.

"No; look closely. The writing is almost faded out; yet, if you will examine it carefully, you will see the whole name. Stop! Have you got any spirits of ammonia?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Fleetwood, pulling out a little drawer in her dressing table and taking from it a small cut-glass bottle with a glass stopper. "Here is some."

"Give it me, and give me the collar."

Mrs. Fleetwood handed over both, and watched Miss Mesh as she wet the faded ink with the ammonia.

"Here, now," she said, "look at that!"

Mrs. Fleetwood looked and read, in letters black as jet, restored by the hartshorn:

"E. W. Herne."

"Well, what of it?" inquired the widow, as she carelessly put aside the handkerchief and began to wind her braids of hair in a coronet above her forehead and a coil at the back of her head.

" 'What of it?' " echoed Ada Mesh, with a look of disgust and impatience. "Why, this of it!—that your governess is an impostor who has come to you under false pretenses."

"She was recommended by Bishop Whiting, who had known her from childhood."

"Yet she may have been something of an impostor to him, also! Or he may, from charity, be concealing a part of her history. He has certainly been reticent about her family."

"Ada Mesh, you are mad! A perfect monomaniac on this subject! Here comes a young lady, bringing with her the highest recommendations in the world; and just because we have not been told her whole family history, and because being in deep mourning she has a pale and melancholy look, and because she has a collar with an unknown name upon it, you build a theory of imposture, dishonor, crime—Heaven knows what not!" indignantly exclaimed Susan Fleetwood, who, having finished her hair, now went to put on her crimson moire antique dress.

"I say that these circumstances, taken together, are all so suspicious that no one but yourself, or some one as blindly trustful, would overlook them. Now, for instance, how can you account for the three initials, E. W. H., on her clothing, with the H. picked out? And for the name, E. W. Herne, on her collar, left by mistake, no doubt, because it was almost faded out until restored to distinctness by the ammonia?"

"Let me see," said Susan Fleetwood, who was busy buttoning the bodice of her dress. "In the first place, I must tell you that I should have no suspicion of Miss Wildering's integrity even if I could not account for these things."

"And you think you can do so satisfactorily?" said Ada Mesh, with as much of a sneer as she dared to show.

"Yes, I do."

"I should like to hear how."

"Listen, then. Miss Wildering has probably inherited these marked articles from the friend or relative for whom she is wearing mourning. These initials, E. W. H., may possibly stand for Erma Wildering Herne, and if so, for some relative of her father, some aunt of herself, perhaps, some older Erma Wildering, who might have married a Herne, and for whom the younger woman, Erma, has been named."

"Oh, how far-fetched!"

"I do not think so at all. I think mine is a very natural conclusion. And then, again, the initials may not stand for Erma Wildering at all, as I said before—they may stand for Ellen Wood, or Emily Webb, or any one of a hundred other names! There, now! There is the dinner bell, and we must stop guessing riddles and go down," said the pretty widow, speaking gayly and carelessly.

"And I will test this before the dinner is over!" said Ada Mesh to herself, as she thrust the little collar once more into her pocket and left the room, shortly followed by Mrs. Fleetwood.

When they reached the drawing room they found assembled there Mr. Gladden, Capt. Blantyre, Mr. Wolfsohn and Erma Wildering.

Mr. Gladden and Capt. Blantyre were talking together on the rug before the open fire.

Rodolph Wolfsohn and Erma Wildering were standing near one of the windows.

Young Wolfsohn, in his threadbare black suit, well brushed, and with his fine head, thin, dark face and classic features, shaded with the dark mustache and waving, dark hair, looked like the ideal prince in tales of chivalry.

Erma, in her black grenadine, relieved only by narrow, white crêpe lisse ruffles at throat and wrists, and adorned only by two sprays of pansies, placed in her black hair and on her bosom by loving children's hands, looked more lovely than she had ever seemed before. Her face had really lost some of that look of frozen despair. It had softened and brightened under the light and warmth of the dark eyes that were shining on hers.

"And this is only the third time they have seen each other," muttered Miss Mesh, grinding her teeth in envy. "Everybody but me! But *n'importe!* My turn will come presently."

She went forward to speak to Capt. Blantyre, while Mrs. Fleetwood crossed the room to welcome Mr. Wolfsohn.

Then the whole party went in to dinner.

In seating themselves, Mrs. Fleetwood took the head of the table, Mr. Gladden the foot, Capt. Blantyre led Miss Mesh to the right side, and seated himself by her, and

Mr. Wolfsohn led Miss Wildering to the left, where they placed themselves opposite the other two.

Old Jugurtha and young Aquilo waited on the party.

Mr. Gladden was one of the most perfect hosts that ever entertained company. Among his other gifts, he had that of making his friends feel quite at home and at their ease, and of setting them to talking on some animated subject that should keep them interested.

The conversation never flagged for a moment. Even the grave Rodolph Wolfsohn and the melancholy Erma Wildering were won to smiles and repartee, and the sour Ada Mesh's caustic remarks were brought out and received with good humor.

But Ada Mesh was biding her time.

With the dessert, the children, who had dined an hour earlier, were brought in, and room was made for them at the table.

It was soon after this that Ada Mesh looked across the board at Erma Wildering and Rodolph Wolfsohn, who sat opposite, and noticed that some faint color of rose had bloomed in the beautiful white cheeks, and some faint light of hope dawned in the lovely, dark eyes of the girl, while those of the young man were bent in admiration upon her.

Taking advantage of a pause in the general conversation, Miss Mesh bent across the table, and said:

"Miss Wildering!"

Erma started slightly, and looked up.

"You came from New York, did you not?"

"Yes, madam," answered Erma, uneasily.

"Of course she came from New York. She lived there nearly all her life, the bishop said in his letter; but I hope she will live here the rest of it," interposed Mr. Gladden, heartily.

"Yes, I know. I was about to ask Miss Wildering another question," said Ada Mesh.

Erma looked up again with a troubled expression.

"Miss Wildering, when you lived in New York, did you happen to know anyone there of the name of—Herne?"

There was no answer.

Erma's large eyes dilated with terror—horror—then closed, as her pale face grew livid, and she fell to the floor.

Ada Mesh's eyes flashed with the fire of victory.

CHAPTER V.

THAT NAME.

Ah, no! she dared not breathe of him—
His fate was never heard;
Her burden'd heart would break to hear
That overwhelming word!
'Twas banished from each lip and ear,
Like sounds of horror and despair!

In an instant all was terror and confusion.

Mrs. Fleetwood, Capt. Blantyre, Miss Mesh, and even Mr. Gladden and the three children, left their seats, and hurried to the spot where Rodolph Wolfsohn stood, gazing with anxious eyes on the face of the unconscious girl, whom he supported in his arms.

"Bring her to the next room, where there is more air," exclaimed Mrs. Fleetwood, leading the way.

Rodolph Wolfsohn followed, bearing his burden tenderly, and escorted by the whole party.

"Lay her on the lounge, if you please, Mr. Wolfsohn. Hand me that bottle of ammonia from my worktable, Capt. Blantyre. Open the windows, uncle. And now all of you please to go out of the room and leave her to me, for I know exactly what to do in this case," commanded Mrs. Fleetwood.

Everyone left the parlor for the drawing room except Miss Mesh, who still lingered, looking on while Mrs. Fleetwood was using every means within her reach to restore the fainting girl.

For a few moments she was so much engaged in her efforts, and so oblivious of everything else, that she failed to observe the presence of Miss Mesh.

Not until Erma showed signs of returning consciousness did Susan Fleetwood turn and, observing the intruder, say:

"This is your doing, Ada, and I think you had better retire before Miss Wildering recovers her senses."

"I only asked her if she knew anyone of the name of

Herne in New York. I am very sorry if my chance question caused her so much distress; but I must say I think the circumstance a very suspicious one!" replied Miss Mesh, as she left the room.

"Do you feel better now, dear?" inquired Mrs. Fleetwood, as Erma opened her eyes with a troubled expression.

"I—I—was very weak and foolish to—to—give way so. What—must you think? How—can I apologize?" murmured the girl, in a broken voice.

"No apology is called for, dear! Or, if any, it should come from us, that anything should have been said at our table to distress you so much," gently replied Mrs. Fleetwood, who had not ceased to bathe the temples of the girl with cologne, and apply ammonia to her nose.

"But oh-h-h! what must you think?" inquired Erma, more as if speaking unconsciously than purposely.

"I can very well understand your emotion, dear. You are in deep mourning. The sudden mention of a name—the name of a beloved, departed friend—overcame you——"

"Yes; that was it," breathed Erma, in a low and hesitating voice. "That was the name of a dear one for whom I mourn, and must ever mourn! But, oh! dearest lady, spare me the subject now and always!"

Susan Fleetwood would have liked to ask who that dear, lamented one, whose very name occasioned such overpowering anguish, could possibly have been; but she felt compelled to refrain, and only replied:

"You shall never be reminded of your cause of sorrow, my dear. So far from ever bringing it to your remembrance shall we be, that we shall rather seek to make you forget it, and we shall pray that time, the consoler, may restore you to happiness."

"Ah, no, no! Never for me will shine the sun of happiness, or even the moon of peace! My day of life has closed in a dark and starless night!" murmured Erma, as if communing with her own thoughts rather than with another person.

"Ah, but you are very young, my dear! Too young to resign hope," said Mrs. Fleetwood, stooping and pressing a kiss on the pale, young brow.

Erma Wildering seemed lost in troubled thought for a few minutes, and then, with an effort as if rousing and compelling herself to speak, she inquired:

"Do you know why that lady asked me that question?"

"Yes! I will tell you all about it. She found a little collar belonging to you with the name, E. W. Herne, written on it, and she was full of curiosity to know who E. W. Herne was. I suggested that it was the name of the friend for whom you were in mourning, and whose wardrobe you had probably inherited," said Mrs. Fleetwood.

"That was perfectly true," said Erma. Then, with an uneasiness she could not conceal, she inquired:

"Was that her only reason for asking me that question?"

"I believe so."

"Did she know anyone in New York of—of that name?" further questioned the girl, in some trepidation.

"Dear me, no! She never was in New York in her life! She was born and brought up in the country, near Mobile, and never was fifty miles away from home until she came here this autumn to visit us."

"And it was only curiosity that caused her to question me?"

"It was only curiosity."

Erma Wildering heaved a deep, involuntary sigh of relief. She was but a child in years and in simplicity, and she did not know that her anxious interrogations of Mrs. Fleetwood had exposed her to more suspicion than all the innuendoes of Miss Mesh could have inspired.

Mrs. Fleetwood wondered why this unhappy girl should be so powerfully affected by the mere mention of the name of Herne, and why, when acknowledging that it was the name of a departed friend so deeply dear to her, she had volunteered no information at all about that friend, not even as to sex or relationship.

But Susan Fleetwood possessed the charity that "thinketh no evil," and so, while greatly perplexed, she said to herself:

"There must be some mystery in the antecedents of this girl, or she, and the bishop, too, would not be so reticent; but whatever it may be, it is not her fault; that is certain."

"Do not let me give you any more trouble, dear Mrs.

Fleetwood. My foolish weakness is quite past, and I am ready to resume my duties," said Erma, rising to a sitting posture.

"My dear, do not exert yourself, I beg. Your school duties have scarcely commenced yet, and so no serious derangement can ensue from a little self-indulgence this afternoon."

"Thanks, you are very kind; but I would much rather return to the schoolroom at once."

"As you please; but you have still fifteen minutes to spare before the hour of calling your pupils together again; from two to five are your afternoon hours, I believe?"

"Yes, madam. Please make my graceful acknowledgments to Mr. Gladden and all others who were kind to me, and my thankfulness that I have quite recovered."

"I will do so," replied Mrs. Fleetwood, as the friends separated, Miss Wildering to go to the schoolroom and Mrs. Fleetwood to the parlor.

"Did the governess give you any explanation of her strange emotion?" inquired Ada Mesh, who was on the watch in the hall, and had seen Erma Wildering go out of one door as Susan Fleetwood advanced toward another.

"Yes," replied the widow, curtly.

"Was it satisfactory?"

"It was."

"Well, and what was it?"

"It was satisfactory. That is all I have to say, Ada," replied the lady, as she passed into the parlor and left Ada Mesh planted there.

"And now I am more determined than ever to find out what it is that the bishop and the governess are concealing from us, for I feel quite convinced that they are concealing something, and that Susan Fleetwood has not found out all about it."

And now, holding that her character for perspicacity was concerned in the success of her undertaking, Ada Mesh resolved that no trivial scruples of honor or honesty should hinder her from the adoption of any and every means toward discovering the secret.

When Mrs. Fleetwood entered the drawing room she found there her uncle, her lover, the "recluse," and the

three children, all anxiously awaiting news of Miss Wildering.

She at once dismissed the children, saying to them:

"Go to the schoolroom, my dears; your governess is already there expecting you."

When the children had gone, she explained to the gentlemen that it was but the sudden mention of the name of that friend of whom Miss Wildering was still in deep mourning that caused her to faint.

"Yet I think it was very strange that such a thing shou!d take such an effect upon her. Who was the dear departed? Some near relative, I suppose," said frank Capt. Blantyre.

"I—do not know. I quite suppose so, however," replied Mrs. Fleetwood, hesitatingly.

"Why, didn't she tell you so much?"

"No. She was very much agitated. She could not speak of the subject. I did not ask her."

"It was very singular," concluded Capt. Blantyre.

Mr. Gladden looked from one speaker to the other in benevolent attention, while Rodolph Wolfsohn stood with his dark, dilated, eager eyes fixed with profound interest on the face of Mrs. Fleetwood, hungrily devouring all she said of Erma Wildering, and looking finally disappointed and disheartened that no more news was forthcoming.

Wolfsohn remained all the afternoon in polite attendance on Miss Mesh, so that he might have the welcome compensation of meeting Erma Wildering at the tea table and afterward spending the evening with her.

Rodolph was doomed to disappointment. Miss Wildering did not present herself to the family circle again that day, but sent a message by one of the children to their mamma, begging Mrs. Fleetwood to excuse her.

Therefore, as soon as tea was over, Rodolph Wolfsohn, resisting all the hospitable entreaties of Mr. Gladden and Mrs. Fleetwood, took leave and departed.

Capt. Blantyre stayed until the latest permissible hour, and then followed his example.

Before going to rest that night, Susan Fleetwood went up to Erma Wildering's room to see how the girl fared.

She rapped very softly, so as not to awaken her, if

asleep; and receiving no response, retired from the door, in the belief that the governess was enjoying repose.

Early the next morning, before any of the family was up, Ada Mesh was down in the hall, on the watch.

She had a new plan of discovery in her head, which was developed as soon as the boy with the mail bag made his appearance.

"Well, Quil," she said, "are there any letters for me?"

"I dunno, miss; but dere's lots o' letters," answered the boy.

"Who are they for?"

"I d'no, miss. I can't wead," replied Quil, as he handed the bag over to the lady.

It was a common, Russian leather bag, with a nickel-plated clasp, and without a lock.

In that simple family, where mutual trust prevailed among all its members, from the master to the last servant, no lock was thought to be needed on the mail bag, and no special care was taken of it.

Aquilo, the faithful footman, went by daybreak to the post office every morning and returned in full time for the family to enjoy their letters with their breakfast.

He or she who first met the family post boy took the mail bag.

So Miss Mesh took it now.

Aquilo, glad to be so soon rid of his charge, went down into the kitchen to get his early breakfast, for which his long ride gave him a keen appetite.

Ada Mesh ran up into her own room, shut and locked the door, and hastily turned out the contents of the mail bag upon the table.

There were seven letters and three newspapers.

Among the letters was one directed to Erma Wildering.

"Still 'Erma Wildering.' Still no prefix of 'Miss' or 'Mrs.' I suppose the bishop does not want to write the truth, and will not write a lie; for this is the bishop's handwriting, and I know, besides, that she wrote to him, and has written to no one else since she has been here, for I always watched and saw Fleurie Fleetwood take her letter down to Mr. Gladden to put in the mail bag, and I saw the superscription if I saw no more. It is my belief that this impostor is married, or—something. Now for

a bold stroke," she said to herself, as she concealed Erma's letter in her bosom to wait for a good opportunity to read it.

Then she stepped out of the room, and peered around to see if anyone was in sight.

Finding the hall and staircase still clear, she hastily returned all the letters and papers into the mail bag, and flew noiselessly downstairs, and into the dining room, where she deposited the bag in full sight on a side table.

Then she passed into the front morning room, which was still vacant, and sat down before the pleasant open wood fire, drew an unfinished strip of cambric embroidery from her pocket, and began to work while waiting for the faimly to come down.

One by one they dropped in.

First came Mr. Gladden in his long, purple gown, and silver-white hair and beard, with little Fance in his arms, and the two pigeons on his shoulder and head.

He came in laughing at the pranks of his pets, and greeted Miss Mesh kindly, and went on with his play.

Next came the children, Fleurie and Eustace, and finally Miss Wildering and Mrs. Fleetwood.

As soon as the morning salutations were passed Mrs. Fleetwood rang for breakfast, and they all passed into the back room where the table was set.

Mr. Gladden's eyes fell upon the mail bag. He put little Fance on the floor, shoo'ed the pigeons from his shoulder and head, and took up the bag and emptied it upon the table.

All the family gathered around him. Even Miss Mesh was hypocritically among them.

"Any letters for me?"

"Any letters for me?"

Such were the usual questions crowded upon the master of the mail bag as he hastily sorted out the mail.

"One for you, from Mobile, Miss Mesh. Two for you, Mrs. Fleetwood, and three for me. And here is the *Intelligencer*, the *Globe* and the *Union* newspapers; and that is all."

"Is there—no letter for me?" inquired Erma Wildering, hesitatingly, yet with but half-suppressed anxiety.

"No, my dear; did you expect one?" kindly inquired Mr. Gladden.

"I rather hoped for, than expected one," repied Erma.

"If it was to come from New York, my dear, you know the mail travels a good part of the way by stagecoaches, which makes the transit slow, if not uncertain."

"Yes, I am aware of that. I suppose I must not look for a letter yet a while," said Erma, patiently.

Everyone gathered around the breakfast table and began to examine their letters while the coffee, tea and edibles were being placed on the board.

Then Mr. Gladden asked a blessing, and they breakfasted, and read their letters, and chatted over the contents of their correspondence, and so consumed a pleasant hour before separating to their morning duties.

Then Mr. Gladden went out for his usual walk over his plantation.

Mrs. Fleetwood retired to answer her letters.

Miss Wildering gathered her little flock around her in the schoolroom.

Miss Ada Mesh flew up into her own chamber, locked the door and sat down to the enjoyment of her stolen sweets—poor Erma Wildering's intercepted letter.

She drew it from her bosom and gloated over the superscription with malicious epicureanism before opening it. Then she broke the seal, thrilling with evil delight at the anticipation of her forbidden feast. No scruple of conscience troubled her as she eagerly, yet deliberately, perused the stolen letter.

It was from Bishop Whiting, as a glance at the signature instantly assured her. It was very cautiously written and very short.

It ran as follows:

123 Blank Street, New York.
October 18, 18—.

My Dear Child: Your letter from Brighthorne, received to-day, gave me much comfort.

I thank Heaven that you have been welcomed in the home of Clement Gladden with so much friendliness.

I knew when I counseled you to go there that his house would prove a very ark of safety for my poor, storm-beaten, weary dove.

I should still counsel you to confide in him—to tell him your whole story—but that I know your sore and sensitive heart cannot bear even the tenderest touch of sympathy. So I bid you keep your secret, if you must, and keep it with a clear conscience, for no one has a right to know more of you than my letter has revealed.

You wish to have constant intelligence of——.

Well, my dear child, I must write very cautiously—too cautiously, I fear, to write clearly; for although there is scarcely a possibility of a plainly directed letter going astray in these days of well-regulated mail service, or falling into other hands in the orderly household of Clement Gladden, yet still there is too much at stake to run the least risk of any sort. So I must be discreet for your sake.

First, in regard to your ——. I have seen him three times since your departure. He is much better in health and spirits than could be expected. Mr. and Mrs. —— are exceedingly kind and attentive to him. I hope that you will be able to come on for the Christmas holidays. If so, you must come at once to see me. I will then try to make arrangements for you to see —— without exciting suspicion.

I have been to the old home, and superintended the removal and storing of the books, pictures and valuable family relics.

These are all secured in the fourth story of my house, subject to your order.

The household furniture was sold at auction, and brought a fair price. The money is placed to your account in the city bank.

I shall continue to visit —— three times a week, and I shall write to you weekly.

Now, my dear child, try to be of good courage. I know no arm of flesh can support you under your present heavy affliction; but turn to Him, without whom not even a sparrow falleth to the ground. "Are ye not more than many sparrows?"

Praying that the Almighty arm may ever uphold you, I remain your faithful friend and loving pastor.

ABEL WHITING.

The face of Ada Mesh was a study for the physiognomist, as she finished the perusal of the stolen letter.

Here was the positive confirmation of her suspicion that there was a mystery in the life of Erma Wildering. But what was the mystery?

To know that there was a mystery and not know what it was, seemed more aggravating than to have merely suspected it!

There was a man, or a male child, perhaps both, connected with it, she knew, because the bishop's letter mentioned "——" as "he" or "him." And there was a broken-up home, of which Erma Wildering must have been the mistress, since the "books, pictures and valuable family relics" had been stowed away, subject to her "order," and the funds received from the sale of the furniture had been placed in bank to her "account."

Miss Mesh brought all the powers of her keen, detective intellect to bear upon this subject, without reaching a satisfactory explanation.

The most probable theory of the secret seemed to be this: that Erma Wildering was a married woman, who, for some flagrant indiscretion, was separated from her husband; or who, for some unpardonable infidelity, was totally divorced from him; that so their home was broken up and their child placed in the keeping of third parties; that the household goods had either been the property of the wife, or had been bestowed on her by the husband's charity; and finally, that the bishop, in Christian mercy, had helped the erring woman, who, probably, professed a penitence he was obliged to regard, to get a decent home in a distant part of the country, where the story of her fall was unknown.

"Well!" said Ada Mesh to herself, "I wonder what Susan Fleetwood could find to say to this proof? If I only dared to show her this letter! But I must not venture it. She is so queer. She would never forgive me for—reading it."

She would not say "stealing" it even to herself.

Her next care was for the safe disposal of the letter.

Should she hide it? No! She dared not keep it, lest by some unforseen accident it should be found in her possession.

Should she destroy it?

She paused long over this suggestion, but finally de-

cided that she could not destroy it, because this was a letter that was watched for, waited for, and its non-appearance at length would cause investigation that would lead to discovery.

She therefore decided that she would reclose the letter and place it in the letter bag the next morning, so that it might come to hand, with the next day's mail.

She examined the envelope and found that, as she had supposed, she had succeeded in opening it without having mutilated it.

She folded the letter carefully and put it back in the envelope; then took some muscilage from her writing desk and fastened the envelope securely, pressed and pinched it all around the edges and at the corners, and then looked at it critically, saying:

"No one in the world could ever detect that it had been opened."

She locked it up in her drawer and left the room.

The next morning she descended early to the hall, waited until the arrival of the family post boy, took the bag from him, watched her opportunity, opened it, and popped the stolen letter in it, and placed the bag on the side table in the breakfast room, and took her own seat demurely by the fire in the morning room, before any other member of the family appeared.

That morning, when the master of the house distributed the family mail, he called out, gladly:

"Here is a letter for you, my dear Miss Wildering. After all, I think it has come right quickly."

Erma's face looked anxious as she took the letter and carried it to a distant window to read; but the anxious, pallid face became radiant and rosy as she read it.

"Good news, I hope, my dear!" exclaimed Mr. Gladdens, sympathetically.

"Oh, yes; thanks, sir," replied Erma Wildering.

"'Oh, yes,' doubtless!" said Miss Mesh to herself, as she also watched the girl's expressive face. "There is a hope held out for a meeting with 'him,' whoever 'he' is, at Christmas."

Miss Wildering finished the perusal of her letter, and put it into her pocket.

The family sat down to breakfast, and the usual pleas-

ant hour was spent over the morning meal, and then they separated to their various avocations.

After this day Ada Mesh always contrived to get the first view of the mail bag and the first perusal of any letter directed to Miss Wildering. But though these letters were full of food for her imagination, they gave her no more information than the first stolen letter had conveyed, and the amateur detective was as far from the heart of Erma Wildering's mystery as she had been at first.

She always opened and closed the letters with great care and without mutilation, and so succeeded in reading and replacing them with success and without suspicion.

The reasonable term of Ada Mesh's visit to Brighthome had expired, but she stayed on, resolved to stay until she should have gotten to the bottom of Erma Wildering's past history.

Her presence in the pleasant house was endured rather than desired.

Everyone secretly wished her away, but no one under Clement Gladden's hospitable roof could have ventured to give her a hint to go—no, not even though she had chosen to take up her abode there for the term of her natural life.

So she prolonged her visit through October, November, and late into December, before she even spoke of terminating it.

Then she proposed to go home in time to spend Christmas with her family.

And then something happened that is not at all uncommon in the experience and habits of kind-hearted people.

Her hosts relented toward their unwelcome guest, and begged her not to leave them.

"Miss Wildering is going to spend Christmas with friends in New York, and will be absent for at least two weeks, and I do not wish all my young friends to abandon us at Christmas," said the good Clement Gladden.

"And you ought to stay with me this winter, Ada, if it is only to help me to get ready for—you know what!" added Susan Fleetwood, in the same spirit.

So Miss Mesh permitted herself to be persuaded to do

exactly as she pleased, and, after that, determined to stay as long as she pleased.

About the twentieth of December, Erma Wildering left Brighthome for an absence of three weeks.

CHAPTER VI.

ERMA'S LOVER.

Oh, tempt her not to love! Her fate,
The bolt by which she fell,
The doom that made her desolate,
The wrong she could not quell,
Forbids. Away! For flight must be
The only safety left to thee!

Erma Wildering returned to Brighthome just about a week after New Year's Day, looking somewhat more composed and cheerful than she had ever seemed since her first appearance at the house.

She was warmly welcomed by every member of the household, from the head of the family down to the youngest child, and by all the servants from Winny Wicket to Quil.

Even Miss Mesh gave her a pressure of the hand at meeting that was more impulsive than hypocritical.

Capt. Blantyre came over especially to pay his respects, and Rodolph Wolfsohn came to spend the first evening on the same day of her arrival.

Of all who warmly welcomed Erma Wildering, Rodolph Wolfsohn was the most deeply in earnest.

Since her first arrival in the neighborhood, three months previous, he had been a frequent visitor. In the early weeks of December preceding his departure for the North, he had been an almost daily guest.

Everyone, even the children, knew the magnet that drew the young recluse so constantly to Brighthome, and Miss Fleurie Fleetwood had once gone so far as to rally her teacher on the subject by quoting for her benefit the matrimonial proverb of the neighborhood:

"Change the name and not the letter,
Wed for worse and not for better."

But Miss Wildering had then so gravely rebuked the levity of her young pupil that the jest was never repeated.

Up to this time the hapless young stranger had taken much comfort in the society of her friend, whom she scarcely recognized as a lover, and not at all as a suitor. I repeat that she was but a child in years and in simplicity, and scarcely more than that in experiences that come early to many girls.

She had not recognized the nature of her relations with Rodolph Wolfsohn—the deep passions he was kindling in his soul, and into which the dark freight of her own life was drifting.

But from the day she felt compelled to reprove her light-headed pupil for ill-timed jests, Erma Wildering's consciousness was awakened, both to the meaning of Rodolph Wolfsohn's attentions and to the state of her own affections.

The revelation filled her with dismay. She began, with fear and trembling, to discourage the attentions of young Wolfsohn.

The more persistently she denied herself to him the more frequent he came, and the longer he remained, in the hope of seeing her at last.

Old Mr. Gladden always encouraged him.

"We shall lose our lovely governess sooner than we bargained for; but it will all be right. Wolfsohn is a fine fellow. A worthy love and a prudent marriage will be the saving of him!" he said, in a burst of confidence, to Mrs. Fleetwood.

"'A prudent marriage'!" echoed the lady. "Do you call that a prudent marriage which would take a wife home to an old, dilapidated house in the midst of a wooded swamp, and to an estate so heavily burdened with debt that it takes nearly all the revenue to pay the interest of the notes?"

"It is not quite so bad as that, my dear Susan. Wolfsohn has paid off more than half the debts since he came into the property, and he will pay off the rest, never fear."

"Yes, I suppose he will, by living like a savage, as he lives now. Why, uncle, just look at that man. His clothes are as shabby as they can be. He has worn the

same old, black cloth suit and the same old, black felt hat ever since I have known him!"

"About four months only. And his clothing is certainly clean and whole."

"But so deplorably rusty and threadbare. And he to pretend to pay serious addresses to Erma Wildering in such a coat! And to presume to dream of marrying her, to take her home—to such a house!"

"I am very much mistaken in Erma Wildering if she is to be governed in her choice of a husband by such mere externals as the quality of his coat or the condition of his dwelling," said Clement Gladden.

"Erma Wildering is a lady, uncle. She is poor, I grant you, and she has to live in other people's houses and teach other people's children for her bread! But she is a lady notwithstanding. So some refinements and elegances are essential to her happiness!"

"They would be desirable; for, as you say, she is a lady; but, my dear, Erma Wildering is still more of a woman, and will never weigh the good grain of a true man's heart in the balance with such chaff as you speak of."

"We shall see," said Mrs. Fleetwood.

"To be sure we shall, in time. And there is time enough before them both. Erma is young—not eighteen yet. Wolfsohn will doubtless like to pay off the rest of his debts, and place his bachelor establishment upon a civilized footing before taking a bride home. But, by the way, my dear Susan, when are you going to take me into your confidence in regard to your own affair? Blantyre has been coming here pretty constantly for the last twelve months, and I think he has received some encouragement."

"Dear old uncle, you are certainly entitled to first and fullest confidence, and you shall have it. Well, you see, the captain never spoke very plainly to me until last October, soon after Miss Wildering came to us. Even then I didn't give him a final answer. In fact, I never positively accepted him until just before Christmas."

"Ah, and that was about a month ago. Is the happy day fixed?"

"No, dear uncle; I am not quite so reckless of my duty as all that would come to. I have not fixed our wedding

day before consulting you; but, if you approve, it shall be Easter."

"Very well, my dear; you have my hearty approval and best wishes," said the old man, cordially.

"And you—have been so good to me—and to my children, too—so very good—that—I don't want to leave you, after all—and—take away the children—you love so well—especially little Fance!" exclaimed Mrs. Fleetwood, beginning with an agitated voice, going on with sobs and ending in a burst of tears.

"Tut! tut! my little woman, this is absurd, you know! What would Blantyre think to see and hear you? Why, he would think he had just cause to be jealous of an old graybeard."

"I can't help what he might think. I am almost ready to give the whole plan up rather than leave you, who have been more than a father to me and mine," sobbed Susan Fleetwood.

"Nonsense, my dear! If you did not leave me I must very soon leave you, without even asking your consent. I am over seventy years old, my dear, and my angels have been waiting for me in the better world for nearly half a century. Think of that! But now I shall join them very soon."

"But, oh, to desert you in your age! And after you have been so kind! And to take away all the children, too! But I won't do that, uncle. I will leave you little Fance, whom you love the best of all because she looks like your wife and is named after her, and is even more your child, in some strange sense, than she is mine. I will leave you little Fance!"

"What! your baby, my dear? Your tenderest little lamb, Susan? I cannot thank you, my child. People thank each other for such very small favors. And this is a part of your life that you offer me! Well, Susan, we will see about it, my dear. And the baby herself must decide. If little Fance makes up her mind to remain with me, I must keep Miss Wildering to take care of her, at least until Wolfsohn deprives me of her, and you must look out for another governess for Eustace and Fleurie, or else send them to school."

"I shall send them to school," answered Mrs. Fleetwood.

On the same day that this conversation took place between Mr. Gladden and Mrs. Fleetwood, the whole family assembled in the evening around their cozy parlor fire.

The weather was so very cold that they had with one accord agreed to spend the evening there rather than go into the long drawing room, where they usually assembled for the sake of music on the piano.

Mr. Gladden was engaged in telling some story of his youth to the circle of interested listeners, who were variously employed in knitting, netting, embroidery, or crochet work, with the exception of "Rooster," who was carving a toy out of a piece of polished mutton bone, and Fance, who was rocking her doll to sleep.

A happier little domestic circle could scarcely have been found.

They were slightly startled by the sound of horse's feet galloping up to the door over the hard frozen snow that covered the ground, and then by a resounding knock on the iron knocker.

"That is Capt. Blantyre!" exclaimed Mr. Gladden, gayly.

"No, it cannot be! Capt. Blantyre left for Ice Cliff this afternoon to see a master builder about some alterations in his house, and will not be back until to-morrow morning," said Mrs. Fleetwood.

While she was speaking the hall door was opened to the visitor, and shortly afterwards the parlor door.

They all looked around, but instead of the expected guest appeared only Aquilo, who said:

"If yer please, sir, it is Marse Rodolph Wolfsohn, who sends his 'spects, and 'quests de favor of Miss Bewilderin's company into de drawing room."

"Bless his impudence!" exclaimed Mrs. Fleetwood, laughing.

"Is there a good fire in the drawing room, Aquilo?" anxiously inquired Mr. Gladden.

"Yes, marster, two on um; one in each chimney."

"Very well, then, I am glad to hear it. Show Miss Wildering thither. My dear, we will excuse you," said

Clement Gladden, turning kindly toward the young governess.

Erma Wildering had risen to her feet, and stood pale as death. She had used every means in her power to ward off the event that was approaching, for she knew it would be the crisis of her own fate.

There are women who, from heartless vanity, will draw a man on and on, until he makes a proposal of marriage, only to receive a mortifying refusal. There are other women who would so shrink from inflicting such a humiliation upon even the most unacceptable suitor that they would use every delicate means to prevent a proposal that must meet only a rejection.

Erma Wildering certainly belonged to the latter class, but unfortunately she had had too little experience, and also too little self-esteem, to understand the first attentions of her lover in time to repel them, or to prevent herself from winning his whole heart, and from giving him her own.

When it was too late to prevent anything except his proposal of marriage, she had honestly and strenuously sought to do that by constantly excusing herself from receiving his visits, or by always evading a *tête-à-tête* when the exigencies of social life brought them together.

Now, however, it was clear that he had made up his mind to know his fate, and know it from her own lips.

He had come to the house at this early evening hour, when he knew that the whole family would be gathered at their fireside, and he had sent in before them all to ask an interview with her.

They all knew as well as herself for what purpose this *tête-à-tête* was sought.

She had no excuse to evade it; she had positively no alternative but to grant it.

She bowed her head in assent to Mr. Gladden's direction, and then turned and followed the servant, who led the way to the drawing room door, and opened it for her.

She entered the room.

The boy softly closed the door and retired.

Rodolph Wolfsohn, in his rusty, black suit, with his fine head erect, was standing on the hearth rug.

"At last!" he exclaimed in a tone of joy, as he stepped

quickly to meet her, took her hand, and gazed in her face with those burning, brown eyes, whose fierce rays she could scarcely bear to meet.

"At last! Oh, Erma Wildering! Why have you treated me so capriciously?"

"'Capriciously'?" she echoed, in a fainting voice, as she sank into the nearest chair, leaned back, and covered her face with her hands.

"Yes!" he exclaimed, vehemently, as he sank on one knee beside her chair, resting his elbow on its arm, and his chin in his hand, that he might gaze up at her.

"Yes, Erma Wildering. You must know—must long have known how I love you! Love you! Great Heaven! that is not the word! People love, or say they love, so many persons! So many things! But, then, there is no other word! Yet look at me! Do not cover your face! Do not hide your eyes from me! Look at me, Erma!"

She dropped her hands from before her face, and met his eyes with hers; but only for an instant; for she could not bear the burning and consuming fire of those blazing orbs.

"Listen to me! Do not turn away! Are you listening?" he demanded, in a voice of suppressed vehemence.

"Yes," she breathed, in an almost inaudible sigh.

"I will not say again I love you! That does not express me! But, Erma Wildering, you can make of me an angel or a devil! Give yourself to me, Erma, and my life will show you what you can make of me! Reject me, Erma, and I swear I will not live on this earth without you! I will, by my own hand, descend——"

"Oh, hush! hush! You blaspheme! You terrify me!" she muttered, in a quick, frightened whisper.

"Then will you make an angel or a devil of me?" he cried, half in agonizing entreaty, half in threatening defiance, as he seized both her hands, and dropped his quivering face upon them. "Will you make an angel or a devil of me?"

"No one but your own spirit can make you either the one or the other. You talk wildly, madly!" she answered, in an agitated voice.

"I know I do, because you have driven me wild, mad, by your capricious coquetry!"

" 'Coquetry' !" she echoed, in a surprised tone, as if she did not understand what was said.

"Yes, coquetry! coquetry that has driven me to desperation! I say you must have known how I worshiped you! You must have known all that you are to me! For two months and more you received all my visits and seemed pleased with my poor society. You drew me on and on into the vortex of passion that may be my perdition! You drew me on and on, you heartless siren! And then suddenly you turn and avoid or repel me! Ever since you came back from your northern trip you have coldly avoided or positively repelled me! Have I offended you in any manner, Erma?" he suddenly inquired, with a pathetic lowering of tone, as he lifted his head and looked into her face.

"No, no," she answered, softly; "the fault is mine, only mine! I did not know—oh, believe me, I did not know the wrong I was doing!"

She paused and turned away her eyes, for she could not meet the burning orbs that were fixed upon hers, as he held her hands and gazed in her face, hanging breathlessly on her words.

"What do you mean?" he whispered, hoarsely.

"I was so lonely, so desolate, I took so much comfort in your company! I looked forward all day long to the evening that would bring you! Then I must have shown my joy, when you came."

"You did! you did! And I thought you loved me! I lived in a fool's paradise!"

"Oh, I did not know the evil I was doing! A chance word from a child revealed it to me."

"Oh, what do you mean? Why should there have been evil in meeting my love?"

"Ah, do not ask me! I must not love! I must not marry! Not for me! Not for one like me are the blessings of home and husband—the happiness of domestic life!" she wailed forth, in a voice full of anguish and despair.

He was still kneeling beside her, holding her hands, gazing up into her face with those great, dark eyes full of consuming fire!

"Tell me one thing," he said, grimly. "Tell me one

thing and then I shall end it all by killing you and myself!"

His lips closed tightly, until they disappeared under the dark mustache, and his eyes shot forth the red rays of rage.

CHAPTER VII.

AN OMINOUS BETROTHAL.

What doth your speech import?
I understand a fury in your words,
But not the words. —SHAKESPEARE.

Erma Wildering looked up with eyes full of amazement and utter perplexity.

She did not understand the strong agitation with which he spoke, but met his gaze with such an expression of frank bewilderment that Rodolph Wolfsohn, after muttering to himself, "I am a brute," asked in a milder tone:

"Have you a favored lover, Erma?"

"No," she answered, promptly.

"Have you ever had one?"

"No, never."

"Forgive my catechism if it offends you, Erma; but you have drawn me on to love you with a love that must be to me salvation or perdition! And you have given me your heart! There is no presumption in saying this, Erma, for I know it! What further I must know is this: Is there any other—Heaven, that I should have to ask it! —is there any other suitor of yours who has any claim upon your heart?"

"No, none!"

"Has there ever been?"

"No, never! Have I not already answered these two questions in effect?" she inquired, meeting his searching gaze innocently.

"Yes, you have! You have! But—where there was so much at stake—where my fate hung—— Forgive me, love! And tell me why, then, since your life has been blameless and your heart and hand free, why should the joys of domestic life be denied to you, as you say they must be?" he demanded, vehemently.

"That is and must remain a secret," solemnly replied the girl.

"Erma, what is it that keeps us apart?"

"I said it must remain a secret!—that is the reason why"—here her voice broke down for a moment, for, try as she might to control herself, her own strong emotion overmastered her.

"Go on!" he exclaimed, almost fiercely, although he did not wish to be harsh. "Go on! What were you about to say?"

"Oh, hear me, patiently, then," she resumed, in a broken voice. "I love you! I do love you, Rodolph! If that knowledge will make you any happier, why, then, take it! And to part with you will give me as much misery as it can give you. I feel that this parting will almost break my heart! If hearts were not so tough to bear," she added, with a dreary smile, "I should say it would quite break mine. If that will reconcile you to our separation, Rodolph, believe it! It is true!"

"But it does not reconcile me. Nothing can reconcile me to the loss of you. And now, since you acknowledge the truth, acknowledge that you love me—nothing shall part us!" he impetuously exclaimed.

"But my secret—my secret, Rodolph!"

"Since it does not involve another favorite lover of yours, a rival of mine, I do not care what it is. It shall not divide us, Erma."

"But oh! if you knew—if you knew what it is, Rodolph, I tell you that you might cast me from you!" she cried, wringing and twisting her fingers in the anguish of her soul.

"'Cast' you from me, my queen! my love!" he exclaimed, dropping down again on one knee beside her chair, taking her hand and gazing up into her face, with all his soul burning through those brown eyes. "Erma, I do not ask you for your secret! Keep it. I ask you for yourself! Give yourself to me!"

"Oh! oh! What must I do? What ought I to do?" she wailed, drawing her fingers from his clasp and wringing her hands.

"Give yourself to me, Erma! Give yourself to me!" he implored.

"Do you know what you ask? Would you—would any man, and you least of all men—endure a wife who had a sinful, shameful secret that she kept, and must forever keep, from her husband's knowledge?" she moaned, her face white with agony.

"Yes!" he cried, impetuously, starting to his feet in his earnestness. "Yes, if it was not her fault! Yes!—a thousand times yes! It is you whom I want, my own dear love, and not your secret, Erma! Is this the only reason why you would reject me?"

"Yes, the only reason. Oh, Rodolph," she breathed, in a tone that brought him to her side again, "I was so happy in your society that I was almost lured into forgetfulness of all that I should have remembered. I do not know whither I was drifting, and drawing you or being drawn by you, until the thoughtless jesting of little Fleurie Fleetwood opened my eyes, and I saw that we were floating to the brink of a dreadful fall. Then, Rodolph, I tried to turn back. I tried to save us both. I denied myself your visits and avoided *tête-à-têtes* when we met in other company. And—oh, I suffered as much as you!"

"And was it only on account of this concealment?"

"Oh, yes! Only on account of this!"

"Then this shall not divide us! Erma! My Erma! Tell me now that you will be mine!" he exclaimed, seizing both her hands and pressing them warmly to his lips.

"If you will have me—burdened with my secret," she whispered, in a trembling tone.

He started up and caught her in his arms and pressed her to his heart.

"Now, there must be no going back on your part! No mistake on the part of the family here! Come, my love!"

And he drew her arm within his own and led her from the drawing room and into the parlor, where the family circle still sat around the fire.

They all looked up with surprise on seeing him enter with a frankly happy face, and bearing Erma Wildering on his arm.

He went straight up to Mr. Gladden, and standing before him, said, with the oddest mixture of gayety and grimness:

"I have come to beg your pardon for having so abused your hospitality as to have——"

"Persuaded our charming young friend to leave us," said Clement Gladden, striking in and finishing the sentence. "Well, I expected nothing less of you, Wolfsohn —Son of a Wolf. And I forgive you, and I wish you well," he added, gayly, as he shook the brown hand of the young man and raised the fair fingers of the young girl to his lips.

"It is not my purpose to leave, however, Mr. Gladden, until my term is up, nor, even then unless you shall have found a substitute for me," said Erma, in a low voice.

"We shall see about that, my dear girl. We must not let our selfish interests and feelings stand in the way of your happiness and that of our friend here," answered the old man, blandly.

Then turning to Mrs. Fleetwood and Miss Mesh, he exclaimed:

"Well, my dears, our young couple here are ready to receive your congratulations."

Rooster and Flurry, who had not been spoken to at all, were the first, however, to respond. Both jumped up, dropping their work, and hurried to Miss Wildering, Flurry seizing her right arm and Rooster her left.

"I told you so!" said Flurry. "I knew how it was going all along, and I told you so; but you ordered me to hush and never to speak of such a thing again! And now, you see, I was right! Yes, and I was right in another thing, too! And you'll find it so! Mind if you don't."

"And what is that other thing in which you are a prophetess, Miss Flurry?" inquired Wolfsohn, smiling, for he was so happy.

"Oh, she knows! I warned her of it! It is:

> "'Change the name and not the letter,
> Wed for worse and not for better!'"

"But I don't understand! I am all in the dark!" laughed Rodolph, as he placed a chair for his betrothed and caused her to sit down.

"Oh! she understands well enough. W for Wildering and W for Wolfsohn. Yes, and my goodness! I did

not think of that before! W for wed and W for worse! Oh! this is going to be a wicious wedding, Mr. Wolfsohn and Miss Wildering. You had both better back out of it!"

"Fleurie, behave yourself!" exclaimed Mrs. Fleetwood, severely, as she put out her hand, seized the young lady by the skirt of her dress and drew her away from Erma's side.

"Yes. And let me speak," said Rooster. "Your 'tongue is hinged in the middle and runs at both ends,' don't it, Flurry? Now, I want to say something to Miss Erma. Don't you be too fast, Miss Erma, because I meant to marry you myself. I did so. I told Quil about it. And I told Flurry, too. Flurry told me that you was too old for me, that I was nine and you was eighteen, which was twice as old as me, so when I would be twenty-five years old you would be fifty, and when I would be fifty you would be a hundred years old, if you lived! But I don't care. Flurry, she don't want you to marry anybody, and she is trying to scare you out of marrying Mr. Wolfsohn, and trying to scare me out of marrying you. I ain't afeard. Wasn't Napoleon Bonaparte's wife, the Empress Josephine, ever so much older than he was, and——"

"Weren't they divorced?" put in Flurry from her corner of the fireplace.

"Don't care. So are other people. Wasn't Gen. Washington's wife ever so much older than he was? And weren't they happy? Oh! So, Erma, if you'll just wait till I grow up as tall as you are, I will marry you myself. And, oh, I tell you what you can do, Mr. Wolfsohn. If you will only leave Erma and let her wait for me, you can wait for Flurry. Now!"

"Thank you, but I am thrice Miss Flurry's age now, and, according to arithmetic, by the time she is twenty-five, I shall be seventy-five, and she might not like that," laughed Rodolph.

"And so you won't do it?"

"The offer is tempting, but I'm afraid I cannot."

"Well, never mind, you are so much older a man than I am that maybe you will die before I grow up, and then I can marry Erma, all the same."

"Thank you—for Erma," said Mr. Wolfsohn.

Mrs. Fleetwood rang the bell.

Aquilo answered it.

"Take this troublesome boy off to bed," said the lady.

Rooster protested, but his mother insisted, and the servant obeyed.

Rodolph Wolfsohn, who had remained standing behind Erma's chair, now took his leave, asking permission to return in the morning.

Mr. Gladden attended him from the room, and when they reached the hall, said:

"Come into the drawing room for a moment, my boy. I wish to have a word with you."

Rodolph followed the old man into the vacant salon that had been the scene of his interview with Erma.

When they were comfortably seated before one of the fine wood fires, Mr. Gladden held out his hand to the young man and said:

"I must again congratulate you, my boy. If I am any judge of character, you have won a prize in this young lady. I wish you both much happiness with all my heart."

The young man took and pressed the offered hand, and bowed over it in eloquent silence.

"But it was not only to say this that I brought you here, but—to—how shall I begin with a proud fellow like yourself?" inquired Clement Gladden in perplexity, as he looked anxiously into the face of his young neighbor.

"Surely, Mr. Gladden, you may say anything you please to my father's son, and he will only take it in kindness and gratitude," said Rodolph Wolfsohn, earnestly, and without a suspicion of what the old man really meant to say.

"Well, I hope so! I hope so! That you will receive my words in kindness, I mean. There is no need of gratitude, my boy."

Rodolph bowed.

"Well, then, this is what I have got to say: Your father and I were neighbors and friends, Wolfsohn. He has done me many a kind turn, which—which——"

"Which you have more than repaid by innumerable kindnesses to him and to his," added the young man.

"No, no! No, no! I meant nothing of the sort, my boy. Your father and I exchanged many neighborly

services; that we did. And that gives me some right, at this crisis of your life, to—to—to——"

"To counsel his son, if you see fit to do so," added Rodolph, somewhat amused at the old man's strange and blushing embarrassment.

"Yes, yes; precisely! pre-cisely—to counsel and assist his son. Therefore, Rodolph, as I happen to be acquainted with the—the—I mean, somewhat acquainted with the condition of your affairs, I hope you will be so good as to allow me to—well, to—place a few idle thousands of dollars at your disposal, as a loan—oh, yes—as a loan, my boy, to be paid at your convenience. You will want to fix up the old house, you know; and—— Ah! forgive me for this interference in your private affairs, my boy; and—your father loved me—and—what I have offered is most heartily at your service," concluded Clement Gladden, looking down and reddening as if he had just solicited a loan of money instead of offering one.

The humility and embarrassment of the old man's attitude took all the sting of offense from Wolfsohn's morbid pride and sensitiveness.

"Mr. dear Mr. Gladden! My honored friend! You do not know how deeply I appreciate your generosity, and how sincerely I thank you for your kindness. But you will understand my motives, and, pardon me, I know, when I tell you that the first humble ambition of my life is to get out of debt, and to keep out of debt—not to sink deeper into it. You will pardon me, therefore, that while deeply sensible of your liberality, and grateful for your offered loan, I am compelled to decline it," said the young man, earnestly.

"Very laudable! Very laudable in you to wish to avoid debt, my dear boy. Well, I said a loan, but, in fact, if I had spoken by heart's real wish, I should have begged you to let me do a father's part by you, and on this occasion of your approaching marriage, give you the help I should have given my son under the same circumstances. I have no children of my own here, you know. My children are beyond all poor earthly needs. If you will permit me——"

"My dear Mr. Gladden!" exclaimed Rodolph, taking and clasping the kind hand that would have helped

him—"my noble friend! If I could bring myself to accept a gift from any man, it would be from you, and only from you! Pardon me if I must still seem ungracious, while most thankfully declining it."

"You are very high-spirited, my boy! Well, well, remember this—that if ever you should need a friend, here am I to serve you to the utmost extent of my power."

Again Rodolph Wolfsohn pressed and bowed over the hand that he still retained, and then he took leave of Clement Gladden and left Brighthome.

Mr. Gladden returned to the drawing room, pondering on the problem how he could best help his poor but proud young neighbor.

"Darkwood is a hopeless wilderness, and Darkwood Lodge is a ruin! How can he think of asking a young lady to share such a home? And how is he ever to improve it without money? I give it up! I give it up! Yet, perhaps, I might find some means of helping him, through her. I'll think of it! I'll think of it! Now, there is Blantyre, with landscape gardeners, builders, upholsterers and decorators, turning Blantyre House and park into a perfect paradise for his matronly bride. And here is this poor young Wolfsohn without the means of mending his dilapidated old lodge for the youngest and prettiest bride that has ever been seen in this neighborhood! They will have a house, such as it is, to cover them, and food, such as it is, to keep them alive, and that will be about all! And yet, I encouraged him to marry, and I know I was right. But having done so, I must devise some means of making that poor girl comfortable—I must, indeed!"

Before the old man had finished his mental soliloquy, he had opened the door and re-entered the parlor.

He noticed that Erma Wildering and her pupil, Fleurie, had both withdrawn from the room.

He was sorry for that circumstance, as it would give Mrs. Fleetwood and Miss Mesh the opportunity, which he knew they would seize, of opening their batteries upon him, in attacking the intended marriage.

"Uncle, what could you have been thinking about to have favored such an improvident match?" began Mrs. Fleetwood.

"Thinking about making young people happy, my dear, by encouraging them to obey the very first law given to man by his Creator," replied Mr. Gladden, quietly, sinking into his old armchair.

"Well, for my own part, I was so shocked that I could not offer them any congratulations! I was glad when the children made a diversion that covered our silence—though they did carry it too far, in the end, so that I had to send Eustace off to bed! The man is a lunatic and the girl is an idiot to think of such a marriage!"

"That is very strong language, my dear Susan!"

"Not a bit too strong! What will they have to live on? You will have to support them! Mind that!"

"My dear, I should be perfectly willing to help them if Wolfsohn would allow me, which I doubt."

"I don't doubt, then!" exclaimed Mrs. Fleetwood.

"Neither do I!" chimed in Miss Mesh.

"My dears, is it not bedtime?" inquired the old gentleman, rising and ringing the bell.

Aquilo responded to the summons by entering with a tray of bedroom candles.

Mr. Gladden handed one to each of the ladies, took the third himself, bade them good-night, and left the room—to escape the altercation.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MORE OMINOUS MARRIAGE.

Life treads on life, and heart on heart;
We press too close in church and mart
To keep a dream or grave apart.
—E. B. Browning.

From this time, Rodolph Wolfsohn, as well as Russell Blantyre, became a daily visitor and welcome guest at Brighthome.

Every afternoon at five o'clock, Erma Wildering dismissed her pupils for the day, and went up into her own room to dress for the evening, and to watch from her front window for the approach of her lover.

On these short winter days, at this hour, it would be twilight; but, as the woods were bare, and the ground was

covered with snow, she could, while sitting at the windo ' of her darkened room, which was only dimly lighted by the wood fire in the fireplace, easily discern the first appearance of his figure as he came walking along the narrow path leading up the wintry, wooded hill to Brighthome.

Then she would go down to welcome him as he entered the drawing room, lifting the old, rusty, black felt hat from his handsome, dark face, that looked all the more distinguished from the contrast of his threadbare coat.

Erma felt that she loved him all the more for his voluntary, courageous poverty.

Very different was the aspect of Capt. Blantyre, who came in faultless evening dress, black broadcloth swallow-tailed coat, lavender-colored pantaloons of the latest cut, vest and gloves to match, polished patent-leather boots, and so forth.

The captain also always came riding in a sulky drawn by a blooded horse, while the poorer gentleman, though coming from a greater distance, came on foot.

Erma saw all these contrasts, and the only effect they had upon her heart was to make her love her poorer lover with all the deeper tenderness and higher honor.

Meanwhile, Ada Mesh watched and listened, seized every opportunity, and neglected no means of discovering Erma's Wildering's secret; but hitherto without success. The few letters that she had contrived to get a sight of had been very cautiously worded, and had only increased her curiosity without gratifying it.

"Now, however," she thought, within herself, when she heard of Erma Wildering's betrothal, "there must be something more definite in the correspondence. She must tell the bishop of her approaching marriage, and he will have something to say about it. I must see both letters, if possible."

Miss Mesh loitered about the hall and staircase for several days, at the most likely hours for observing the family mail service, without learning anything new.

At length, however, one afternoon, just as the little school was let out, Miss Mesh sauntering leisurely in the front hall, saw Fleurie Fleetwood fly down the front stairs with a letter in her hand.

"What is that, Flurry?" inquired the lady, stopping the child.

"Oh! it is a letter Miss Erma gave me to give Uncle Clement to put in the mail bag," she answered, holding the missive up to view.

Miss Mesh saw that it was directed to the Right Rev. Dr. Abel Whiting, Bishop, etc.

"Well, give it to me. I am just going into Mr. Gladden's study to take my own letters. I can take that as well," said Miss Mesh, reaching forth her hand.

Fleurie held the letter out to the woman, and then, quick as lightning, snatched it back and clasped it fast.

How like a flash are the intuitions of childhood! Fleurie acted on an impulse that she could neither understand nor resist.

"Give me the letter, my dear," said Miss Mesh, in as careless a tone as she could assume.

"No, thank you, Miss Ada. I was sent to take it to Uncle Clement to put in the mail bag, and I had better do it myself," answered the child, holding the letter close to her bosom.

"But why, when I am going to him myself? Why should both of us go?" asked Miss Mesh.

"Why, indeed? Let me take your letter, also, Miss Ada. It is better that I should wait on you and do your errand than that you should wait on me and do mine," said the child, with some reason.

"There, then, thank you, Flurry. Take my letter, too," answered Miss Mesh, who was afraid to persevere lest she should excite suspicion that might defeat all her future projects.

Fleurie went off, singing, to her uncle's study, and Miss Mesh remained walking up and down the hall, sorely disappointed, and wondering whether there might yet be an opportunity for her to get a sight of that letter before the mail bag left the house. It would start the next morning by daybreak, she knew; but where it would remain during the night, or whether she could get access to it, she could not tell.

Her cogitations were interrupted by the sound of wheels on the gravel walk before the house, followed by a resounding knock on the outside of the door and met by

the hurrying steps of the servant, Aquilo, who opened it to admit Capt. Blantyre.

The gay captain bowed with lowly reverence to Miss Mesh as he passed on to the drawing room.

The next moment Rodolph Wolfsohn entered so noiselessly that Miss Mesh only became conscious of his presence when she turned and found the dark, picturesque figure of the young man standing before her, rusty black felt hat in hand.

"Ah! good-afternoon, Mr. Wolfsohn. Miss Wildering has not come down yet. Mrs. Fleetwood and Capt. Blantyre are in the drawing room—*tête-à-tête*, you know. Will you walk into the little parlor? There is a good fire there," said Miss Mesh, leading the way to a front room opposite that one which the first visitor had entered.

Rodolph Wolfsohn bowed and followed the lady.

"Sit near the fire. It is very cold. I have never known so cold a winter, when the snow lay frozen over so deeply on the ground before," continued Miss Mesh, as she hospitably pointed to an armchair in the chimney corner.

"Thanks," said the young man, bowing again, as he seated himself.

Miss Mesh took the next chair, remarking, casually:

"Erma is not ready to make her appearance yet. She has been writing letters home—to her parents, I suppose. Are you acquainted with her parents, Mr. Wolfsohn? But of course you are."

"No, really, I am not," answered the young man, uneasily, feeling for the first time how very strange it was that Erma Wildering had never mentioned her father or mother, nor ever made the slightest allusion to any member of her family.

"What? Not know anything about the parents of your betrothed? Is not that very unusual? To be sure, we know nothing whatever of Miss Wildering's family. She has never breathed a word about one of them to us; but I surely thought she must have been more communicative to you, her affianced husband," said Miss Mesh, meaningly.

"I—presumed her to be an orphan. She is in deep mourning, as I supposed, for her parents. If my supposition is true, why, of course, the subject of her parents would be a very painful one to her. She would nat-

urally avoid it," replied Rodolph Wolfsohn, as an excuse for his betrothed, and as a sedative to his own painfully excited thoughts.

"I do not see that! Dutiful and affectionate children love to speak of their parents, even though they may not be able to do so without tears," said Miss Mesh.

"Individuals are sometimes exceptions to general rules, I do not think Miss Wildering is one of those who are apt to talk of their private sorrows," said Mr. Wolfsohn, with some grave rebuke in his manner.

"I know she is not, with us, at least! With you I thought she would have had no concealments."

"'Concealments'!" echoed Rodolph Wolfsohn, as his face flushed and his dark eyes flashed.

But Miss Mesh having sent her most effective shaft, prudently retired behind it by slipping out of the room. Rodolph Wolfsohn arose in much agitation and began to walk up and down the floor.

Who was this Erma Wildering—this dark enchantress who had ensnared his soul and body—to whom he was bound in life and death? Who was this mysterious girl of whom he knew nothing more than that she was a beautiful young woman, who came to the neighborhood recommended by Bishop Whiting?

But she was indorsed by the bishop, and that seemed to be enough for the worthy family who had received her, and ought, perhaps, to be satisfactory to him—a man of a noble race and of unblemished honor.

Yet, what was the secret she was keeping even from him, her betrothed husband?

But he had promised that this secret should make no division between them, and he was resolved that he would keep his promise.

Besides, he loved her! He loved her with a passion that was destiny to both, whether to their salvation or—perdition.

He continued to walk up and down the room with irregular steps and troubled thoughts until the door noiselessly opened and Erma Wildering entered the room.

He went to meet her smilingly—all dark thoughts disappearing in her presence, as the shades of night before the dawn of day.

"You are late in coming down, dear," he said, half reproachfully, as he led her to the sofa and seated himself by her side.

"I have been writing to my old friend and benefactor, Bishop Whiting, to tell him of our betrothal," answered Erma, with a smile; adding: "And, afterward, I had to change my dress."

"He is your guardian, I presume—this venerable prelate?" ventured Wolfsohn.

"Well—no, not quite that. Though—yes, in some sort he may be called so," replied Erma hesitatingly and confusedly.

"Oh! I did not know. I thought, perhaps, you were an orphan——" said Mr. Wolfsohn, stopping then, and looking straight in the face of the girl.

She lowered her eyes, and did not answer his implied question.

Rodolph Wolfsohn sighed and shuddered.

An awkward silence fell between them that lasted for the few minutes before the ringing of the tea bell.

Then Erma Wildering arose. Her pale face was even paler than usual, and her eyes were full of anguish as she laid her hand on the back of his chair, and murmured, in an agitated voice:

"Rodolph, I have a word to say to you, and I must say it now."

"Say on, then, Erma," he answered, mournfully, as he also arose and stood before her.

"Rodolph, I love you. Heaven only knows how truly. But—if ever you have a painful suspicion or damaging thought of me, to make you regret our bethothal, Rodolph, you must consider yourself free to break it!"

He gazed on her with widely dilated, burning orbs.

"Break with you! Give you up! Never! No, Erma. Whatever may have gone before—whatever may come after, I am yours! You are mine!" he earnestly exclaimed, opening his arms and folding her to his bosom.

"Oh, this is love!" she breathed, in a sigh of content, as her head sank upon his breast.

"Such love, my Erma, that all else in this world sinks to nothingness in comparison to it. We love each other. We have each other. It is enough!"

"It is enough," she echoed, softly.

"We shall be very poor, my girl—very, very poor! Shall you care for that?" he whispered.

"Not the least in the world. Oh, Rodolph, I think I love you all the more because you are poor. I also am poor; poorer than you. I have no house and land. You have both."

"I never longed for wealth until now—to enrich you."

"But I do not want to be enriched. I love you better so. I love you in this rusty black suit. I love the old black felt hat that seems such a part of you that I never see it without seeing your dark face under it. Is this very foolish, dear Rodolph? Well, I love you and your poverty, and I will gladly share it with you. I do not think I could have peace, much less joy, in wealth and prosperity, Rodolph. There are some such poor, shrinking flowers that they cannot bear the sunshine. I am like them, Rodolph. Is this foolish, too?"

He answered with a long, clinging kiss.

And what more of the like "foolish" things might have been said or done can never be known, for at that moment there was a light rap at the door, followed by the entrance of the boy, "Rooster," who began to say, in an aggrieved tone:

"Didn't you hear the tea bell? There's Flurry and Fance and me been waiting for our tea ever so long, and nobody never come! There's Capt. Bantam and mamma spooning in the drawing room and old Uncle Clement and Miss Ada spooning in the study, and you, too, spooning here, and——"

"What do you mean, you terrible little monster?" laughed Rodolph Wolfsohn, taking, or, rather, retaining the hand of Erma Wildering and leading her toward the dining room.

"Well, we are most starved! That's what I mean! And Flurry went after Capt. Bantam and mamma, and Fance went after Uncle Clement and Miss Ada, and I have come after you! So there, now!" answered Rooster, running on before them.

From the study and the drawing room came the other members of the family, and soon they were all assembled around the tea table.

After tea the party adjourned to the cozy parlor, where all *tête-à-têtes* were given up, and the evening was passed in music and general conversation.

At a late hour the two gentlemen took leave and went away.

Soon after their departure the family separated and retired.

Ada Mesh went to her room, but did not go to bed. She sat up and waited.

"The de'il had business on his hand."

And so had Ada Mesh. She had found out, by seemingly careless questioning, that the mail bag with the letters to be posted usually remained on the master's writing desk in his study through the night until early morning, when the servant would come in to light the fires and open the window shutters, and finally take the bag to carry it to the post office.

So Miss Mesh put out her light and sat up and watched in the dark until she felt quite sure that everyone in the house was in bed and asleep, with locked chamber doors.

Then she slipped off her shoes, relighted her candle, and cautiously crept out of her room, closing and locking the door behind her lest by some most improbable chance anyone should come to the chamber and discover her absence.

She crept softly downstairs to the lower floor, and found her way to the study.

The door was locked, but the key was on the outside. She softly turned it, opened the door and entered.

The little room was already half lighted by a red and smoldering fire of mixed green and dry oak wood, intended to last through the night, and protected by a high wire fender.

The master's old armchair sat just where he had left it, by the black walnut writing desk, and on the latter lay the mail bag.

She took it up and slipped silently from the room, and fled noiselessly up the stairs to her own chamber, where she secured the door before commencing her search of the letters.

She found Erma Wildering's letter to the bishop

among some half dozen others that possessed no attractions for her.

She took it out, moistened the mucilage of the envelope with a wet handkerchief, and after some little difficulty and delay succeeded in opening it without mutilation.

It was dated Brighthome, January 15, 18—.

It began by telling of her journey from New York to Virginia, and of her safe arrival at her destination, the warm welcome she received from the family, and so forth.

Miss Mesh read all this with many a "pish!" and "pshaw!" but, at length, on the third page of the note, she came to what she was looking for—the subject of the approaching marriage:

"And now," ran the letter, "I have to tell you of something that will surprise you. Do you remember my mentioning the name of that gentleman who befriended me on that night when my journey had nearly come to a fatal termination through the unmanageable horse? Do you remember, also, that I told you he proved to be Mr. Rodolph Wolfsohn, a friend and neighbor of Mr. Gladden? Well, that gentleman has been a frequent, almost daily, visitor at this house ever since I have been here. Mr. Gladden loves and respects him very much.

"So do I.

"Some few days ago he asked me to marry him. I refused at first; but afterward I consented. Oh! indeed, I fear that this will shock you very much. You will say that, with such a horror in my life, I should not dream of marriage, at least for a happy married life. Well, I do not dream, I do not hope, for happiness. No, indeed, I do not!

"But, my friend, your poor, weak, erring child has come to this—that she would rather marry certain misery in him than not marry him at all! I cannot, cannot give him up! There! that is all about it!

"I have told him nothing, absolutely nothing! I dare not, must not, do it! You will blame me very much; but do not lecture me.

"And do this much for me—take the news to my poor, dear ——. I dare to believe that he will be glad."

There was much more in the letter, chiefly relating to

money matters; but here ended all of interest to Miss Mesh.

She got up, took pen and ink, and copied out the paragraphs here quoted, with the date of the letter, and locked it up in her dressing case.

Then she carefuly sealed up the envelope again and replaced it in the mail bag, took the latter in her hands, and slipped downstairs to replace it.

She was careful to put it in the exact spot from which she had taken it, and to lock the door when she left the study.

As she did so the hall clock struck two.

A shudder—whether caused by the consciousness of guilt or the solitude of the hour and the place, or from all these causes combined, would be hard to tell—but a shudder of unusual violence, such as she had never felt since she had left the malarial districts of Mobile, shook the fragile frame of Ada Mesh.

"I shall get a chill if I do not hurry right away to bed," she said to herself, as she flitted along the hall.

Just then a sound fell on her ear that stopped her as suddenly as if she had been stricken with palsy.

It was the sound of a footfall in the little parlor.

She hastily blew out her light and pinched out the snuff, and watched and listened. She was not frightened, for she thought that it was some servant or some member of the family in search of medicine or something that they might have needed in the middle of the night.

So she watched and listened, only resolved to slip away upstairs as soon as she should hear the door open.

Presently the warning sound came; steps approached the door; the handle was turned.

She fled noiselessly up the stairs, but from a dark corner of the upper landing she looked over the railing to see who would come out.

The moon was shining brightly through the glass fanlight over the front door, and illuminating the front part of the hall so well that she knew she would recognize anyone who might appear there.

So she watched and listened from her hiding place.

In another moment the parlor door opened and two persons emerged from it—a man and a woman.

Miss Mesh bent over as far as she dared to scrutinize them, when, what was her amazement to recognize—Capt. Blantyre and Erma Wildering!

They stood before the front door in the full light of the moonbeams. Erma's face was whiter than Miss Mesh had ever seen it before.

Capt. Blantyre looked anxious and weary.

Erma spoke.

Miss Mesh leaned over low enough to risk her neck to listen.

"You will not betray me?" pleaded Erma, in a low, pathetic voice.

"Betray you? Never!" he whispered, so earnestly that the words reached the hidden listener.

"Not even to her?"

"Not to her, or to any living creature! Do not fear, my poor child. Have I not as much at stake as you?"

"Oh, no! I am a woman!"

"Then do not doubt me at all. Take courage! Good-night."

And so saying, the man drew the girl to his heart and kissed her!

The scandalized Miss Mesh nearly dropped with righteous indignation.

When she recovered herself the captain had gone, and Erma Wildering was flying up the stairs through the darkness.

As soon as she had passed, Ada Mesh, half idiotic from mixed emotions, fled to her room.

CHAPTER IX.

MISS MESH'S REVELATIONS.

Whence proceeds this weight we lay
On what detracting people say?
Their utmost malice cannot make
Your head, or tooth, or finger ache;
Nor spoil your shape, distort your face,
Or put one feature out of place. —DEAN SWIFT.

When Miss Mesh crept shivering to bed, on the night of her strange discovery, her one coherent idea, amid a

chaos of thought and feeling, was to denounce Capt. Blantyre and Miss Wildering next morning, and so break off two marriages.

"To be kiss—kiss—kissing in the dar—dar—dark! And both of them engaged to be mar—mar—married to somebody else! But I'll stop—stop—that in the morning," she chattered to herself, as she shivered and shook with what she now knew to be one of the very worst agues she had ever caught in all her ague-stricken life.

She ought to have had proper attention then, to mitigate present suffering and prospective peril; but she could not obtain it without leaving her warm bed to ring the bell and call up some of the servants or family—which she had not the courage to do, while she lay there in the frozen grasp of an ague that congealed her blood almost to the point of death.

She could only crouch down in the middle of the bed, and wind herself from head to foot, as closely as possible, in the bed coverings.

Soon she grew worse, as the reaction set in with the battle between the ague and fever in her harassed frame.

Shivers were succeeded by flushes; the burning heat quenched in a bath of ice; the icy sweat dried up in raging fire that ran through every vein and wasted every nerve; then maddening headache and delirium set in.

The whole family assembled in the breakfast room next morning and waited long for their guest, who did not make her appearance.

"Will some one go and call Miss Mesh? She has never been late before," said Mr. Gladden, at length.

Fleurie Fleetwood obeyed by running out of the room and upstairs to the door of the lady's chamber.

In five minutes the girl came running down again and flew into the breakfast parlor, in a state of great excitement, quite out of breath, her cheeks flushing and paling, her eyes starting.

"What is the matter?" exclaimed her mother.

"I—I don't know—the door was locked—I knocked and called Miss Ada, but got no answer."

"She was asleep, then," put in Mr. Gladden, as the breathless girl stopped.

"No! no! I heard her tumbling about and talking to

herself—awfully! Like—like Hinda did, when she had that dreadful illness."

Mr. Gladden and Mrs. Fleetwood simultaneously left the room and hurried upstairs.

Even as they reached the landing, they began to hear the ravings of the fever-stricken woman.

"Ada! Ada, dear! Can you get up and open the door for me?" cried Mrs. Fleetwood, kneeling on the floor at the threshold of Miss Mesh's chamber and speaking through the keyhole.

"Ho! ho!" was the only response she got.

"Oh! I am afraid Ada is very ill, uncle!" said Mrs. Fleetwood, rising.

"Kissing in the dark!" cried the voice from within.

"Just hear her!" said the lady.

"Kissing in the dark! Ha! ha!" laughed the voice within.

"Just wait here, my dear. I will go downstairs and get my tools and open the door," said Mr. Gladden, as he left the spot.

A box of carpenter's and locksmith's tools are necessaries in every remote plantation house.

Mr. Gladden soon returned with the required instruments, and, kneeling at the door, turned and pushed out the key from its hole and then picked the lock and opened the door.

"Now you can go in and attend to the poor girl," said the old man, as he retired from the spot.

"And, uncle, you had better go down and get your breakfast. Send Hinda up to me, and tell Winny Wicket to keep my coffee hot."

"Yes, my dear. Let me know quickly if a doctor is needed. But, I suppose, of course he will be," said Mr. Gladden, as he went downstairs.

"I will send you word by Hinda," answered Mrs. Fleetwood, as she entered the room.

It was cold and dark in that chamber. The fire had nearly gone out, and the window shutters were closed.

Only from a little light that came in at the door, could Mrs. Fleetwood see the condition of Ada Mesh and her bed.

The bedclothes were in the wildest state of disorder,

and the woman, with her face crimson from high fever, was tumbling about from side to side, muttering incoherently.

Mrs. Fleetwood went to her instantly.

"Ada! Dear Ada! Are you ill?" was the natural but unnecessary question.

"Kissing in the dark!" laughed the woman.

"Hush! hush! dear Ada! You don't know what you are talking about," said Mrs. Fleetwood, in a soothing tone; but in the next moment, led by some latent suspicion or curiosity, as to whether there might be any "method" in the woman's "madness," she rather inconsistently inquired: "Who was kissing in the dark, Ada?"

"Why—why—Mr. Gladden and—and—the mail bag and Aquilo!" replied the sick woman, tossing herself violently from the front to the back of the bed.

"Poor creature, she is very ill! The doctor must be brought from Ice Cliff as soon as possible," said Susan Fleetwood to herself, as she tried to straighten the twisted and turned-up sheets and blankets.

Hinda, promptly sent by Mr. Gladden, entered the room, saying:

"My goodness, Miss Susan, ain't this just awful?"

"It is bad. Open the windows, put some wood on the fire and go and ask your master to send for the doctor directly," said Mrs. Fleetwood.

"Ha! ha! Kissing in the dark!" exclaimed the fevered woman from the bed.

"Who?" inquired Mrs. Fleetwood, soothingly, with her cool hand on the hot brow of the sufferer.

"Hinda!—and—and Capt. Blantyre! Ha! ha! Yes! I saw them."

"Who, me?" exclaimed the horrified colored girl, in a tone of righteous indignation, not to be mistaken. "I 'clare to my 'Vine Marster in hebben, ma'am, I nebber did no sich a thing in de whole course ob my life! May I drap down dead if I did!"

"Nonsense, Hinda! Of course not! She is raving in delirium, you know. She doesn't know what she is talking about," whispered Mrs. Fleetwood.

"Well, den, I wish she wouldn't rave my good character away from me. Me do sich a thing as dat! Why, if

any white man, or colored gem'man, either, was to offer me sich a 'front as dat, he'd get all his front teeth slapped down his throat 'fore he knew what was comin'! 'Deed would he, if he was a major-general commandin', let alone a capt'n. To take my good character away—like——"

Here Hinda's voice broke down, and she tucked both fists in her eyes and sat down sobbing.

"Hinda, go and take my message to your master, and then send your mother here. You are unfit for anything!" said the lady.

"Reckon so, too, wid my good character all raved away," sobbed the scandalized girl.

Mrs. Fleetwood got some icicles from the outside of the window, and broke them up in a cambric handkerchief, and applied them to the burning head of the sick woman.

While she was so engaged, Winny Wicket entered, accompanied by Hinda.

"Marster done sent Quil arter de doctor, Miss Susan. Dis is awful, honey! She must a cotched her death of cold!"

"Dat ain't no reason why she should take my good character away from me," sniffed Hinda.

"I tell you she was raving, girl! Don't be a fool!" said Mrs. Fleetwood, impatiently stopping for a moment in her work of cooling the burning head.

"Now, you know, Miss Susan, I ain't so satisfied about dat myself, I ain't. Hinderer done tell me all 'bout it. But I ain't got so much con-fi-dence in dese here milinary officers. I gwine to keep a sharp lookout arter dat Cappin Blarneytire!" exclaimed the old woman.

"Kissing in the dark!" muttered Ada Mesh, suddenly flinging herself to the front of the bed.

"Umph! Humph! I'll warrant you!" cried the old woman, her black eyes snapping as she bent over the invalid, and said: "Yes, honey, to be sure dey was. Who was kissin' in de dark, honey?"

The delirious creature looked hard at the speaker and answered:

"Winny Wicket and—and Capt. Blantyre."

Winny Wicket dropped down plump into a chair without uttering a word.

Mrs. Fleetwood screwed up her lips very tightly to keep from bursting into a laugh.

"Miss Susan!" gasped Winny Wicket, as soon as she could get her breath—"Miss Susan, put a pillow ober dat 'oman's mouf and smudder her! Do it, Miss Susan! She's got de rapid hyderyphoby! Dat's what she's got—de rapid hyderyphoby! And she'll hab to be smuddered! Dat's what dey do in de 'stremity ob hyderyphoby."

"Winny!" exclaimed Mrs. Fleetwood, very severely. "Attend to the duties for which you were summoned! Make the room tidy! And then you must take my place at Miss Ada's bedside, while I go down and get my breakfast."

"Miss Susan, you can go down and get your breakfast now, ma'am. Me and Hinderer's had our'n long ago. I'll sit by de bed and 'gree not to smudder her 'dout de doctor's leave! I'll wait till he come; for now I 'members it's suicide in de fust degree to smudder a hyderyphobic 'dout de doctor's orders. An' while I watches ob her, I'll see as dat gal puts de room to rights. Me and de cap'n, indeed! Putty talk she's a-talkin'!"

Mrs. Fleetwood looked at her patient, whose high excitement seemed to be subsiding.

Susan Fleetwood had been, herself, a very long resident of the extreme South, and she knew the nature of the Southern malarious fevers. She knew that this one must have been caused by a severe cold caught by one who was thoroughly saturated with malaria, and occurring in midwinter, could only result in typhoid fever of the most malignant type. She knew, too, how rapid was the progress of this particular malady in this case—how soon delirium was succeeded by coma, and coma too often by death. She saw that Ada Mesh was already sinking into a comatose state, and that she would neither say nor do anything to excite the nurse's fears and cause the injudicious action consequent upon fear; she saw that Ada Mesh would now lie quietly for some hours.

Therefore she felt that she could safely leave her to the care of the two women while she went downstairs to breakfast.

In due time the physician from Ice Cliff, Dr. Dutton, arrived, and was shown to the bedside of the patient.

His fiat confirmed the opinion of Mrs. Fleetwood.

Miss Mesh had typhoid fever caused by severe cold taken upon a previous malaria-poisoned constitution.

Illness is not a pleasing subject to treat by any except physicians; so we will not linger over the weeks during which Miss Mesh vibrated between life and death.

A morbid fear of infection had caused Mrs. Fleetwood to send all her children on a visit to Miss Gunn, a wealthy and elderly maiden lady, who lived at a place called "The Marsh," about five miles from Brighthome.

Erma Wildering's proper "occupation" being gone, she devoted herself, day and night, to the care of the fever-stricken woman.

Even Rodolph Wolfsohn could see but little of her at this time.

When, for a few moments, it was granted him to speak to her, he would reproach her for neglecting him, and she would say:

"Humanity, dear Rodolph! Humanity requires me to take care of this poor woman."

"There are plenty of servants in the house who are entirely at her service. Mr. Gladden says so," the young man would answer, uneasily.

"Servants are not intelligent nurses, dear Rodolph; and the doctors assure us that as much, or more, depends upon the nurse than upon the physician."

"But, my dear, suppose you get the fever and—die of it? Oh, Heaven!"

"In that case, dear Rodolph, it would be the very best thing that could happen for me, for you and for all!"

"What do you mean, Erma?"

"That whatever may befall any human beings through the performance of duty, must be the very best that can happen for them, and for all connected with them."

"Erma, I cannot follow you, in faith. I am troubled and anxious about you. I am weary and fainting for you!"

In answer to this, she put her arms about his neck, and stooped and pressed a kiss upon his forehead.

It was drawing near Easter when Ada Mesh was pronounced out of danger.

She had learned—for she had heard it from Dr. Dutton, as well as from every member of the family—that she owed her life to Erma Wildering's faithful nursing. And with what feeble appreciation her nature was capable of, she was grateful to her young attendant.

But her terrible malady had left her—as typhoid fever too often leaves its victims—even weaker in mind than in body, and, in her case, with a strange hallucination, growing partly from fact and partly from imagination, and settling itself into a firm conviction.

"I do not like to say it, Miss Erma. I do not like even to think it," she would whisper, with mysterious earnestness, "but I did see old Mr. Gladden and Mrs. Fleetwood kissing in the dark! He, a man of such venerable age and worshipful character, and she, a lady of good repute, betrothed to an honorable gentleman! Oh, the times! Oh, the manners!"

"For Heaven's sake, do not believe this," Erma would exclaim, without a single suspicion that Miss Mesh's hallucination had any foundation in anything that she had really witnessed. "For Heaven's sake, do not believe this, Miss Ada! Mrs. Fleetwood's reputation is beyond question, and Mr. Gladden's character is far above all human frailty. Remember that in the night you fancy you saw this transaction you were already sickening for this terrible fever, and, therefore, what you thought you saw must have been only a part of the phantasmagoria of fever."

"No, it wasn't! I saw it all before I was taken ill. I tell you, I went down to put a letter in the mail bag. And I saw those two standing in the study, with that same mail bag on the table between them—kissing like everything! And she said: 'Don't tell,' and he said: 'No, never!' There, now! If that was the phantasmagoria of a fever dream, I can't distinguish fact from fancy."

"Oh, pray, say no more about this! I am sure that you are mistaken!"

"I am sure I am not! But don't be afraid. I shan't say one word about it to anybody but you. Mrs. Fleet-

wood is my friend. Mr. Gladden is my kind host. I should not even mention this to you, only when a thing like that is on one's mind, and I might almost say on one's conscience, one must speak of it to somebody, you see, or die. You are the safest to talk to, and so I talk to you. But I can't stand this place! There is too much hypocrisy, too much deceit, too much double dealing and underhand ways. And I am going home as soon as I am able to travel," said Miss Mesh, speaking sincerely enough, but with such a wondrous want of self-knowledge and correct judgment as must have made anyone who understood her character stare with amazement.

On Easter Sunday morning Miss Mesh joined the family at breakfast for the first time since her illness; but she was not strong enough to accompany them to church, for the drive to St. James', at Ice Cliff, was a long one.

On Easter Tuesday noon, Capt. Russell Blantyre and Mrs. Susan Fleetwood were married by the Rev. John Cleveland, rector of St. James', Ice Cliff.

The ceremony was performed in the drawing room, at Brighthome.

The bride wore a traveling dress of dark-gray silk, with hat, gloves and mantle to match.

The rites were followed by a dainty wedding breakfast, at which only a few of the family friends were present.

Immediately after the breakfast the bridegroom and the bride set out in their traveling carriage to Ice Cliff, where they were to meet the stagecoach and start on their wedding tour to the North.

The three children, who had been brought home from The Marsh to be present at this marriage, were to remain at Brighthome under the charge of Miss Mesh and Miss Wildering until the return of their mother and stepfather, when their future destination was to be settled.

And now, Rodolph Wolfsohn began to press Erma Wildering for an early wedding.

"There is nothing now to delay our union," he urged. "Your contract with Mrs. Fleetwood was virtually at an end when she became Mrs. Blantyre. It was never contemplated, I suppose, that you should accompany your pupils to Blantyre House, or that you should remain at

Brighthome after their departure. You could not do the last, in fact."

"No," said Erma, slowly. "I think they do not even contemplate my removal to Blantyre House, and, of course, I could not remain here. I should have nothing to do."

"Then, my dearest, put me out of suspense by fixing our marriage day at once," he insisted.

"But, don't you see, dear Rodolph, that I cannot do that now? I must remain here in charge of these children until their mother returns. I do not know exactly when that will be—whether in a month, six weeks, or two months. But this I will promise you—to fix the day as soon as possible after the return of Capt. and Mrs. Blantyre," replied Erma, fixing her truthful, dark-blue eyes on those that were seeking them.

"And promise this, also, that I may have something definite to rely upon—that our marriage shall take place within a week after the arrival of the Blantyres," he pleaded.

"I will; I do," answered Erma.

And from that day she spent all her leisure hours in making the simple preparations for her wedding.

There was to be no parade over this. The lovers were to be married quietly in the drawing room at Brighthome, and go directly from thence to Darkwood.

Erma did not wish to wear mourning on that occasion, and yet, she had no dresses except black ones.

So she went to Ice Cliff, inviting Miss Mesh and Fleurie Fleetwood to accompany her.

There she purchased as good a white organdie muslin as the village could supply, and took it home to make up for a bridal costume.

Fleurie Fleetwood whispered to Miss Mesh, when they found themselves alone, that she hoped Mr. Wolfsohn would please to afford himself a new suit to be married in, at least. "He has worn the same suit all the autumn, winter and spring, and it wasn't new in the autumn, even, and look at it now!"

Miss Mesh did not reply. She was greatly changed since her dangerous illness.

The village doctor said that she was very fortunate to

have escaped with her life. She looked, indeed, as if she had been raised, not from a sick bed, but from the grave itself. Her complexion was cadaverous, her features shrunken, her eyes sunken, her form emaciated and enfeebled, her understanding weakened, her memory confused, and, strangest of all, her will nearly palsied.

She no longer had either the wish or the power to investigate Miss Wildering's affairs, or to criticise the conduct or expose the frailties of anyone.

Her only pleasures in life now were those of eating and sleeping; and she had an enormous appetite for the first, and a wonderful inclination to the last.

"I do think that poor woman's brain must be softening," Mr. Gladden would say to himself, as he looked pityingly on the altered aspect of Ada Mesh, and mentally resolved that she should suffer no want of comfort or happiness that he could supply.

"If they all leave me, I can keep her on here as nursery governess for little Fance. She is certainly capable of teaching the little one its letters," he mentally added; for now it had been settled in regard to Mrs. Fleetwood's youngest daughter that she should remain at Brighthome.

The baby herself had decided the question when it was put to her.

She would " 'tay wid daddy and de pidgies," she had said.

And when, to try her father, she was recklessly told by Capt. Blantyre that perhaps they would take all the pigeons away with them, she clasped old Clement Gladden around his neck, and laid her soft cheek against his silver beard, and said she would " 'tay wid der daddy as long as she lived."

Little Fance had taken to calling the aged man daddy from the time she could speak, no one knew wherefore, except that it might have been from hearing some of the negro children calling their fathers daddies. At any rate, the very first words her infant lips had tried was "daddy," and she had applied it to old Clement Gladden, as she patted and kissed his face while he held her in his arms.

Capt. and Mrs. Blantyre wrote from time to time, first from Washington, then from New York, then from Boston, where they did not linger long, because they found

the first of May there as cold as the first of March in the South.

They remained away just for the "regulation" month, and returned to Brighthome about the fifteenth, to spend a few days before settling down at Blantyre House.

The short absence had taught mother and children that they could not be separated. So the plan of sending the latter to school away from home was given up.

A resident governess was to be engaged for them and they were to live at Blantyre House.

But little Fance persisted in her desire to " 'tay 'long o' dear daddy." And it was decided that she should do so; for it was as true as strange that Mrs. Blantyre, fond mother as she really was, loved this lovely child less than her other children, and could more easily part with her than with either of the others.

Very young children are wise in one respect, at least; they always respond to all true love from others; but they never waste their precious love on unresponsive people.

Old Clement Gladden adored Baby Fance, and she worshiped him.

Mrs. Blantyre, knowing the child to be well and happy, never troubled herself much about Fance, who never cried for her mother. This tells their whole story.

CHAPTER X.

A NEW HORROR.

No peace, no peace! Ah, weary one!
Thou shalt be like the dove of yore,
Who found no spot to rest upon
Wandering the waste of waters o'er.
—SISTERS OF THE WEST.

The marriage day of Rodolph Wolfsohn and Erma Wildering was fixed for the twentieth of May.

As soon as Mr. Gladden had heard of it, he sent for the young girl, and said:

"My dear child, if you have any friends or relatives whom you would like to invite to your wedding, pray do so. Ask them in my name to come and stay as long as

they may find it convenient or agreeable. I should have requested you to do this earlier, had I thought of it, but so many other things engaged my attention, that I fear I may have neglected your interests."

"No, indeed, dear Mr. Gladden, you have always been kindness itself to me, as well as all others," Erma gratefully replied.

"Well, well, my dear, I can only hope that I have not been intentionally unkind. Now, write at once and summon any friends you may wish to see. There is no more time to be lost, you know."

"I thank you so much, dear sir; but I have no one to ask," said Erma, with an involuntary note of sadness in her voice.

"No one, child?" inquired Mr. Gladden, compassionately, incredulously.

"Not one."

"Bishop Whiting?"

"I should not presume to ask him to take so long a journey. And there is no one else."

"Very well, my dear. As you please. You have my best wishes, Erma."

So the interview closed.

Mrs. Blantyre had determined to remain at Brighthome until after the marriage of her governess.

"You know, as the event is so near at hand, it would seem very unkind to that poor girl to go away and leave her here without any chaperon for her wedding," she had said to her husband, when he had hinted a wish to terminate their visit.

Capt. Blantyre, who was still under the spell of the honeymoon, readily acquiesced in any measure proposed by his beautiful wife. Therefore, though he was really very anxious to be settled at home, he consented to stay at Brighthome for the short time intervening before the wedding, only stipulating that he should have to ride over to Blantyre House every morning to see that all was going on right there, promising to return in time for their midday meal, and finally insisting that they should leave Brighthome on the day after the wedding.

"Certainly, we will go home to Blantyre House on

Wednesday," agreed the lady. "And, oh! by the way," she exclaimed.

"Well?" said the captain, indifferently.

"Do you remember one bitter cold evening last January, when the snow was deep on the ground, and everything was frozen up?"

"I remember so many such evenings."

"Oh! but this was a very special evening. It turned out the severest night of the season. You and Wolfsohn were here to tea. You drove home in your gig. He walked. You both left about ten o'clock. Now you remember?"

"I remember a score of such winter nights! All as cold as they could be, and each one colder than all the rest! It is a wonder I and Wolfsohn ever lived through it. It is well I am married and he is about to be. We couldn't stand such another courting winter!"

"But you don't recall the particular night I mean?"

"No, I don't."

"Oh, you innocent! It was near the last of January. It was the night Miss Mesh was taken ill with the typhoid fever. Ah! if you had known what had been said about you that night, you would have cause enough to remember it," said the lady, with mock gravity.

"What was said of me!" repeated the captain, in a somewhat changed voice, as he turned toward the window.

"Yes! When I went to Ada Mesh's bedside next morning and found her wild with fever, the whole burden of her talk was that she had caught Capt. Blantyre and some one else kissing in the dark!"

"What!" roared the captain, starting around with his face purple with rage and confusion.

"There! What a temper you have!" cried the lady, half frightened, as he stared at her. "No one believes it, of course. We all know you are quite above suspicion, dear Russell! And even if you had not been, there was no opportunity for such folly that night or any night. I always received you when you came here, and never lost sight of you until you left—and that, not from jealousy, dearest, but from simple affection."

"But what in Tophet put such a thing in the head of

that old cat?" growled the captain, his whole manner agitated, and his color fluctuating from purple to crimson and from crimson to purple.

"Fever, poor thing! Nothing but fever! She was delirious, and did not know what she was talking about."

"Who—who was present when she made this—when she talked this infernal nonsense?" demanded the captain, still anxious and confused.

"Come, Russell, you are not on the quarterdeck that you should need to use such strong language. There was no one present but myself. Nor did she repeat the charge, but varied it as whim or accident directed. Next minute it was Aquilo and the mail bag that were kissing in the dark. And then some one else; and then some one else; and finally, just before her wild delirium sank into stupor, it was another pair who were kissing in the dark. And who do you think these were? Clement Gladden and Susan Fleetwood. This last idea is rooted in her brain to this day. She has forgotten all the others. She thinks you are a deceived man, Russell."

The captain burst into a loud laugh, an unnatural and discordant laugh, that scarcely covered his excessive confusion, as he said:

"You really alarmed me, Susan. I am excessively sensitive on such subjects. You never told me this before."

"I never deemed it worth telling. I don't know why I told you just now, unless it was because I thought you would enjoy it as a good joke. I had no idea you would take it so seriously, or I should not have told you at all," replied Mrs. Blantyre.

"It was not pleasant," growled the captain, as he lighted his pipe and strolled out on the lawn to smoke it.

Capt. Blantyre had, up to this day, been always courteously kind to Erma Wildering, but from this day he was coldly polite. He had been always civil to Miss Mesh, but he was henceforth curt almost to rudeness.

On the Sunday before the wedding day all the family went over to St. James' to attend church. There they met Rodolph Wolfsohn, who stayed after the service to speak to the rector about his required services on the following Tuesday.

As the wedding was fixed at an early hour on that

day, Mr. Gladden took an opportunity to invite the rector to come over on Monday and remain all night at Brighthome, so as to be rested and refreshed for the pleasant ceremony of the morning.

It was well that Mr. Cleveland accepted Mr. Gladden's invitation and arrived at Brighthome on Monday afternoon; for that evening the sun set behind a bank of clouds that threatened heavy rain on the morrow.

Tuesday, the twentieth of May, dawned more like a November than a May day.

Erma Wildering, who had passed the night in tears and sighs, in self-accusations and self-doubts, in bitter regrets for the irrevocable past, and terrible anticipations of the future—Erma Wildering, who had said to herself: "I know that I risk a terrible calamity in marrying him, yet, would rather marry certain and eternal misery than not marry him at all"—Erma Wildering, who had arisen several times during the latter part of the weary night and opened her window and looked out and closed it again before the dawn finally appeared, at length got up for the last time and threw open her windows to let the gray light of a dark, overclouded morning enter.

In her morbid state of mind she felt it to be ominous. She recalled the couplet of the old folklore:

> "Blessed is the bride that the sun shines on,
> Doomed is the bride when the rain falls down."

She was startled by a rap at her door. It was Fleurie Fleetwood, calling in an excited manner:

"Miss Erma! Miss Erma! Miss Erma!"

"Well, Flurry, dear, what is it?" inquired Erma, going to the door and opening it.

"Oh! you are up! Well, as I am to be your bridesmaid, I must dress you this morning myself, you know," said Fleurie, entering.

"Me is bridesmaid, too. Me d'ess oo, too," said Baby Fance, following her sister into the room.

"The idea!" exclaimed Miss Fleetwood, in scorn of such humble, infantile help.

"She shall be bridesmaid, if she wants to be. And she shall help me to dress. The baby and her angels may avert some evil—who knows?" added Erma, mentally.

Her simple wedding toilet was commenced. The organdie dress and tulle veil, the white slippers and white gloves were laid out on the bed, when there came another knock at her door.

Fleurie officiously ran and opened it.

"Here is a box have come for Miss Erma which was sent from the Red Fox, where the stage fetched it to, and he hopes it's in time," was the rather obscure announcement of Aquilo as he entered and deposited a large, square, pine-wood box on the floor.

"Who brought this, Aquilo?" inquired Erma.

"Miss Gunn's man, Hi. He just happened to be coming from the Red Fox, and brought it."

"But who sent it?"

"De Red Fox did. It 'rove dere last night, which dey hopes you'll get it in time. I has brought de tools to open it, if you want me to," added the boy, as he knelt down before the box.

"Yes, thank you, open it," replied Erma, who thought, perhaps, that the box itself might reveal its own mystery.

"Oh! I know it is some beautiful wedding presents," said Fleurie, who was intensely interested.

"Booful weddin' p'esents," echoed Baby Fance, as she sat down on the floor, quite near the box.

"It must be so," added Erma, with a smile; "though who can have been so kind as to send me anything, I cannot tell."

"Daddy did! Dear daddy did," suggested Fance.

"He was the most likely, indeed. But in that case, it would not have come from the Red Fox," replied Erma.

"Well, then, I think Papa and Mamma Blantyre must have sent it," suggested Fleurie.

"But, then, you know, dear, it would not have come from the Red Fox," smiled Erma, who, in the company of these bright children, was losing somewhat of her gloomy forebodings.

"Oh! I weckin Misser Teeveland did send it," exclaimed Fance.

"Oh, no, he didn't! He couldn't afford it. I'll tell you who sent it. Miss Barbra Gunn sent it her own self! Why, to be sure she did! Didn't her own man bring it? And hasn't she got a right to send it? She is Mr.

Wolfsohn's own dear grandmother's first cousin. Uncle Clement and mamma invited her to the wedding, but she said she had too bad a cold to come out, but she would not forget the bride! So, of course, she sent it. I'll tell you. She ordered it from Staunton, where she does all her best shopping, and it came down to the Red Fox by the stage, and was left there, because that was as far as the stage could bring it in this direction, and she sent her man to meet it and bring it here, and it has just arrived in time, too!" exclaimed Fleurie, in all the excitement of having made a discovery and solved a conundrum.

"That is the most likely theory, my dear. Yet no," said Erma, as she stooped and examined a red card pasted in one corner of the box; "no, this does not come from Staunton, but from New York."

"Well, maybe, as it was for a wedding, Miss Gunn might have ordered these things from New York once in a way. I do wonder what they are. Oh, Quil, what does make you so long opening that box!" exclaimed Fleurie, in great impatience, which, to tell the truth, was secretly and silently shared by the owner of the closed box.

"Why, you see, Miss Flurry, dis here soff, pine-wood box has been out in dis here rain, coming from de Red Fox in a open wagon, and de wood has got so swelled around de screws, which is in so tight, as I can't make no headway a-drawin' of 'em out, 'specially as de screw-driver don't fit de screw heads good. But you have patience, Miss Erma. I'se got dese two screws out, an' now I can put de end ob de tool under de lid and pry it off," answered the boy, as, kneeling by the side of the box, he put forth all his strength and wrenched and pried, until at length he raised the lid and pulled it up.

"Dar it is open, Miss Erma," said the boy, in triumph.

The children were the first to crowd their little heads over the box.

"Stand a little farther off, my dears. Let me get to it. I will show you what is in it presently," said Erma, kneeling on the floor.

The children obediently withdrew, and stood waiting eagerly at a little distance.

Erma bent her head and removed a mass of paper, and then of cotton-wool, and then of linen, and looked in.

What was it she saw there? What had turned her face so suddenly white and wild with horror?

One moment she gazed on that object, aghast with amazement, and then threw herself across the open box, shrieking:

"Cover it up! Cover it up! Oh, my soul! Cover it up from all human sight forever and ever!"

CHAPTER XI.

HIDDEN.

Oh, doomed indeed to worse than death,
To teach those sweet lips hourly guile,
To breathe through life with falsehood's breath,
And smile with falsehood's smile!

An exile all in name and fame;
A wanderer, weary of the way;
A stranger, without kin's sweet claim
Or any peace, go where you may.

—FRANCES S. OSGOOD.

"Oh, cover it up! cover it up!" exclaimed Erma, wildly, as she rallied herself and began to crowd the waste paper back into the box, hiding its contents, while Fleurie, Fance and Aquilo hurriedly gathered around her, and stood watching her work in surprise, affright and disappointment.

"Why—what—what was it, Miss Erma? Was it anything dreadful?" inquired Fleurie, while Fance and Quil looked the question they did not ask in words.

"There! there! Put the screws in again and screw it down, Aquilo!" said the girl, hastily replacing the lid on the box and ignoring the curiosity of her companions.

"La, Miss Erma, what was it?" inquired Quil.

"Do as I bid you, boy; or, here, give me the screwdriver, and I'll do it myself!" exclaimed the pale and trembling girl.

"No, no, Miss Erma. In course, I'll 'bey you, miss," said Aquilo, kneeling down and going to work.

"Me wants to see what is in the box first. Mit Erma

p'omised to show me what is in the box," said little Fance, sitting before the mysterious case.

"Hush, sis. Look there!" whispered Fleurie, pointing to Erma, who had sunk upon the floor, with her head and folded arms upon the seat of a cushioned chair, and sobbing as if her heart would break.

"Poo-or Mit Erma!" said the pitying child, as she went to the weeping girl and put her arms around the bowed neck.

Erma put out her hand and slipped it around the tiny waist of the little one, and drew her close, while she continued to sob until her paroxysm of emotion had exhausted itself.

Then she arose and wiped her eyes, heaving deep sighs.

A fine sense of delicacy prevented Fleurie Fleetwood from asking any more questions, while tender little Fance, taking a lesson from her elder sister, also refrained.

Aquilo had finished his task, and now stood over the closed box with eyes and mouth open in astonishment, waiting orders, and—hoping explanations.

"Lift up that box, Aquilo, and put it in the bottom of that closet," Erma commanded, in a tolerably steady voice.

The boy obeyed, and then stood waiting further directions.

Erma hesitated, looked at him, and muttered a few half-articulated and half-audible words, seeming as if she were tempted to ask or to bribe the boy not to speak of the box or of her emotion on its being opened; but that she resisted.

"I thank you, Aquilo. There is nothing else you can do for me. You can go," she said.

And the boy ran downstairs to tell the cook and housemaid about the box, which they had both seen arrive in the wagon, and which contained something which, as soon as Miss Erma saw, she shrieked and fell upon it and hid it with her arms and head until she recovered herself, and then she crammed in all the waste paper and made him screw it down again—"same as if it had been a coffin opened too late!"

"Did you see what it was?" inquired Winny Wicket, in a mysterious whisper.

"Not a bit! Seen nuffin but linen and raw cotton and paper!" replied the boy.

"But you allers was such a stupid, Quil. I know if I'd 'a opened that box, I'd a got a glimpse o' what was inter it afore I ebber shot it up again!" said Hinda.

"I be bound for you as you'd tried, anyways, but you wouldn't a' 'ceeded," retorted the boy.

"You shet up, bofe of yer! I gwine to carry a cup o' good strong coffee up to Miss Bewilderer, which she'll 'quire it to s'port her sperits while she's dressin' to be married, anyway! To be married at sich an unlawful hour ob de mornin' in broad daylight, an' go right off to de man's house! 'Stead ob de good ole fashion o' habbin' de wedding by candlelight in de ebenin'; wid music and dancing; and ladies and gentlemen in all de rooms; and de house full o' company; and lots ob feastin' and fuss in de house, day an' night, for a week, or maybe a mont', 'fore ebber de bride an' groom goes away for good! An' den lots an' lots an' lots of presents to de colored people what has been waitin' on 'em all de time! Dat's what I calls gettin' married!" exclaimed Winny Wicket, in wrath.

"And me, too!" said Hinda.

"And me, too!" added Quil.

"Why, I 'members when Miss Babby Gunn's youngest young sister, Miss Meely, got married to young Mr. Bibb, dere was de house crammed wid company from top to bottom; an' feastin' an' dancing for a fortnight 'fore ebber de young folks went home. An' I couldn't begin to tell you all de heaps an' heaps o' presents what de servants got. Why, Jehi', de coachman, which was only a stable boy den, he got 'bout sebben dollars in all, jest for blackin' gemmen's boots an' holdin' deir horses an' sich! An' as to de wimmin servants—hush, honey!—dey got more ribbons an' ruffles an' artificials geb um when de ladies went away dan you could shake a stick at!" exclaimed Winny Wicket, with enthusiasm.

"But dat was a long time ago, wasn't it, mammy?" inquired Hinda.

"'Twasn't yes'day, anyways. But dat was de way decent people used to get married in de good old times!

Ah, dem was times!" said Winny Wicket, with a smack of her lips.

"Dey was so!" cried Aquilo, probably thinking of the presents.

"But as to dis here low-life way o' gettin' up 'fore sunrise, to get married 'fore breakfas', an' goin' right straight off home, all in de broadest daylight, I think it's downright barefaced—I do! An' come to 'sider on it, I don't think as it's good, lawful wedlock, neider! I don't! De ole gentry nebber got married in dat owdacious way."

"I wonder what make Miss Susan Fleetwood an' Miss Wilderer do it, den?" mused Hinda.

"Who de debbel knows? But dey's furriners; I reckon dat's de reason! Dey don't belong to dis 'spectable neighborhood, dat's one comfort! An' anyways, I ain't a-gwine to fall from grace on deir 'count," concluded Winny Wicket, who, while she spoke, had been rolling her plump black form from cupboard to table and from table to fire, preparing a small tray with a clean damask napkin and a small coffee pot, sugar bowl, cream jug and cup and saucer, to take up to the chamber of the bride elect.

When Winny Wicket rapped at Miss Wildering's door, she was immediately told to enter.

As soon as she crossed the threshold she cast a quick glance all around the room in search of some signs of the mysterious box, but saw nothing of it.

She saw Erma sitting in a white wrapper before the dressing glass, while Fleurie Fleetwood stood at her back, brushing out the long black tresses of the girl's hair, and little Fance, with loving eyes, stood watching the operation.

"Mornin', Miss Erma! Wish you many happy returns ob de day, miss," said Aunt Winny, congratulating the young lady as if this had been her birthday instead of her bridal morn.

"Thank you very much," replied the girl, in a gentle tone.

"Which I has brought you a cup o' good, strong, hot coffee, honey, as I think you ought to hab, bein' as de breakfas' will be belated," said the woman, drawing forth

a little stand from the wall with one hand and setting the tray upon it with the other.

"You are very kind and thoughtful, aunty. I thank you very much," replied Erma.

"I brought it up in de pot, honey. Shall I pour it out for you?"

"If you please."

"Dere! Now you can put de sugar an' cream inter it to suit yourself," said Winny Wicket, as, having filled the cup, she slid the stand up close beside the chair of Erma.

Fleurie Fleetwood, who had just finished dressing Erma's hair by winding the last rich, lustrous black plait around the shapely head as a natural coronet, retired from the chair and left the girl to her coffee.

"Hi, honey! Whar dat box what Quil tell me gib you sich a turn?" boldly inquired Winny Wicket, when at length she had screwed her courage up to the insolence.

"It is put away," coldly answered Erma.

"What was in it, honey, to gib you sich a scare?" persisted the woman.

Erma visibly trembled. For a moment she did not reply. When she could speak she only said:

"I do not wish to talk of it."

"Oh, berry well, den, honey; jest as you please! It ain't none o' my business, nor likewise I ain't gwine to fall from grace on dat 'count. Well, honey, I got heaps to do downstairs, so I hope you'll 'scuse me."

"Certainly, and thank you for all your kind attentions," said Erma, sweetly.

"An' when you's ready for dat tray to be tuk down, you can ring for Quil. Leastways, one ob de chillen can ring for him," said Winny Wicket, as, half offended, she left the room.

Erma's toilet was soon finished, with the exception of the veil, wreath and gloves, which were only to be assumed at the last moment, before going downstairs.

"Now, Miss Erma, we must go and get dressed," said Fleurie, as she contemplated her work with pleasure. "And I won't ring for Quil; for I can take that tray down myself," she added, as she raised the little coffee service and left the room, followed by Fance.

As soon as she found herself alone, Erma locked her door, and went to the large Saratoga trunk that she had brought with her, at her last return from the North, and that now stood packed for transportation to Darkwood House.

She hastily unstrapped and unlocked it, raised the lid, and lifted out the trays and cases, and then unpacked it to the bottom.

Next she went to the closet, where stood the mysterious box. She dragged and pushed it to the front of the trunk, and then, drawing in a deep breath, and exerting all her strength, she managed to lift it up and deposit it in the empty bottom.

It took up nearly all the space, so that she could replace but a few articles of clothing around and above it.

Then she also put back the trays and cases, and locked and strapped the trunk.

Finally she took up the piles of clothing that had been crowded out, and she arranged them on the shelves and pegs of the closet.

"I can leave these garments here to be sent for; but it would never do to leave that box with it in here! Ah, who could have been so cruel as to mock me with that present? Who? Why need I ask? There is but one on earth capable of such an atrocity! But if he sent it, as he must have done, how could he have obtained a clew to my address? And if he knows my address—oh, Heaven of heavens! He will soon be upon my track, soon be here to denounce me as the—— Oh, horror! What shall I do? What shall I do?"

And here the miserable girl dropped on her knees beside the bed, covered her face with her hands and prayed for help.

A knock at the door startled her, and she sprang to her feet.

"It is only I, Erma dear. I have come to see you a moment before you go down," said the kind voice of Mrs. Blantyre, speaking even more kindly than she had ever spoken before.

"In one moment, dear madam," answered the girl, as she hastily shook down her dress and smoothed the front of her hair before opening the door.

"Good-morning, dear," said Mrs. Blantyre, as she came in, handsomely dressed for the wedding. "I hope you feel very well this morning, though the weather is so bad. Did you ever hear it rain harder than it does now? It really pours! Well, dear, here's a letter for you. Aquilo brought the mail early this morning, and uncle has just opened it. I thought I would bring this to you myself."

"Oh, thank you, dear Mrs. Blantyre!" said Erma, as she took the letter, which she found to be from Bishop Whiting.

"Open and read it, my dear. Don't mind me. I will excuse you," said the good-natured lady, as she sank into the cushioned chair.

Erma bowed and withdrew to the window to peruse the missive from her old friend.

It was all comforting, cheering and strengthening.

But it was the postscript that lifted a great burden of anxiety from her mind. It ran thus:

"P. S. I had really forgotten to tell you that a few days ago a box came here by express from Boston, directed to you in my care. Of course, I forwarded it immediately. I supposed it to be an offering from some old friend who bears you in loving remembrance, but who does not know that you have left my house. Let me know if you receive it safely."

"A 'friend!'!" muttered Erma, bitterly. "But it is some relief, to be sure, that the 'friend' in question did not send it directly here, and therefore could not have discovered my address."

She then folded the letter and put it into her traveling satchel that stood conveniently at hand.

"The children were telling me, dear, that you had received a box this morning which, when opened, frightened you almost into fits. I know, of course, children exaggerate; but still, I would like to know what it was that startled you," said Mrs. Blantyre, seriously.

Erma was very much disturbed. She turned pale and red; she sank down on the nearest chair and trembled.

"Don't answer my question if it would pain you to do so, my dear," said Mrs. Blantyre, kindly, but with a shade of distrust in her voice.

Erma, with a great effort at self-control, arose and went to the lady, took both her hands, and looked into her eyes, and said:

"It would pain me to speak of it, dear Mrs. Blantyre. It would grieve me, who am grieved enough without it."

"On your wedding day, too! Well, dear, I will not be so heartless as to urge you. But who could have been so thoughtless or so cruel as to send you a gift that caused you such a shock? Is it admissible to ask?" inquired Mrs. Blantyre, who could not help being as full of curiosity as she was of compassion.

"It was sent anonymously, directed to me, in the care of Bishop Whiting, who forwarded it. That is all we really know," replied Erma, in a voice of so much emotion that Mrs. Blantyre's curiosity was increased tenfold; but as her compassion grew in the same proportion, she forbore to pursue a painful subject.

"Here, dear," she said, opening a large, flat red-morocco casket that she had kept until this moment covered with her pocket handkerchief, "here is our joint offering to you, I like things *en suite*, and so, instead of having each of us get you some separate article that would make up a heterogeneous whole, I proposed that we should all club together and get this. Look!"

And she opened the casket and displayed a full set of pearl jewelry.

"Oh! how beautiful they are; and how good you all are to me!" exclaimed Erma.

"They come from our hearts to one we have learned to love," said Mrs. Blantyre.

"The necklace is from uncle, the bracelets from Capt. Blantyre and myself, the earrings are from Fleurie and Fance, and the brooch is from Eustace," added the lady, handing over the casket.

Erma raised the gift in both hands, and pressed it to her lips.

"And we hope you will wear them all for the first time on this auspicious occasion," said Mrs. Blantyre.

"Indeed, I will, with so much pleasure. I have not a jewel in the world except some jet."

"And now, love, let me clasp them on you, and adjust your veil also. It is time for you to go down. Mr. Wolf-

sohn has arrived; he is in the hall room putting the last touches to his toilet, and attended by his little groomsman, Eustace, who is as proud as a peacock, let me tell you. And—— Ah! here are Fleurie and Fance ready to wait on you."

The two little bridesmaids entered, both dressed in sheer white organdies, with white slippers, white gloves, white sashes and wreaths, and bouquets of white rosebuds and snowdrops.

"Two lovely little fairies," said Erma, as she stooped and kissed them, and pointed, with a smile, to the pearl earrings that had been their part of the gift.

"Oh! you have got them on!" exclaimed both the children, in delight.

Then Fleurie insisted on clasping the pearl bracelets around Erma's arm, and the necklace around her throat, while Mrs. Blantyre arranged the veil and wreath of orange flowers.

A very beautiful bride looked Erma Wildering, as she stood before the glass a moment ere turning to leave the room, though her costume was a very simple one.

She wore the long-trained dress of clear, plain white organdie; a long veil of white tulle; a wreath of orange flowers on her blue-black hair, and pearls on neck, arms and bosom.

Mrs. Blantyre wore her own prettiest dress in honor of this occasion—a rich, silver-gray silk, with point-lace berthe and sleeve ruffles, diamond brooch and earrings, and a white rose in her bright brown hair.

There came another rap at the door.

It was Eustace Fleetwood in gala dress—an absurd little swallow-tailed coat, black pants and white vest, polished patent-leather boots, white kid gloves, and a white rose in his button hole.

"I have come to tell you that we are ready," he said, referring to the bridegroom and himself.

"And we also," said Mrs. Blantyre, good-humoredly.

"And I wish to say—I don't know whether you appreciate it or not, but I think, considering how you jilted me for him, that I am now acting with—magnanimity!" he added.

"Indeed you are, Eustace!" said Erma, as she bent and kissed the boy.

He was not at all responsive or grateful.

"Now, don't you do that again," he said; "I am a man of honor, and, besides, I don't want to be called out by Wolfsohn!"

Erma looked surprised.

Fleurie gravely observed that she thought her brother was right.

Mrs. Blantyre laughed and said something about the wisdom and precocity of young America, and they all left the room and went downstairs.

The rain was still pouring down, like the opening of another flood. It made quite a deafening noise as it rattled on the roof of the piazza or dashed against the windows.

"It is almost dark enough to have the chandeliers lighted," said Mrs. Blantyre, as they descended to the hall.

Mr. Gladden, Capt. Blantyre and Mr. Wolfsohn stood at the foot of the stairs.

With a low-toned greeting, Rodolph Wolfsohn took the arm of his bride and drew it within his own.

Eustace Fleetwood, with the air of a grand seignior, followed the example with his sister.

Clement Gladden led little Fance.

Capt. Blantyre walked beside his wife.

So the wedding party entered the drawing room, where the minister, in his white surplice, stood upon the rug awaiting them.

After mutual bows of salutation, the party formed in the usual manner before the minister, and the marriage ceremony commenced.

Mr. Gladden gave the bride away.

The very young bridesmaid, Fleurie, deftly enough, removed the bride's white glove, that her finger might receive the ring.

And at the conclusion of the rites the youthful groomsman, Eustace, with an air of delicate secrecy, slipped a silver-edged, white envelope containing the fee that had been intrusted to him in the clergyman's hands, and

kissed the bride, as was his unquestioned privilege, after the groom.

Caresses and congratulations followed all around.

Miss Mesh, in a blue barege dress, came from some part of the room to wish the married pair much joy. Perhaps she meant it; at any rate, it was absolutely necessary to do it.

Then the colored people, who had gathered in the hall to peep in over each other's heads, came in for their share of the handshaking, as was their time-honored custom in that neighborhood.

"Which I must bear my testermony agin' dese newfangled ways o' gettin' married, jest to ease off my own conscience, ma'am, 'cause I wouldn't like to fall from grace on dat account, but I hope as de Lord will forgib you all for moving de ole lan'marks, and I wishes ob you bofe ebery joy an' blessin' in dis worl an' de nex'. Amen!"

Such was Aunt Winny Wicket's exordium as she wiped her clean, fat, black hand on her spotless white apron and took the bride's kid-gloved fingers in an affectionate clasp.

Erma, smiling, thanked her.

And then followed Hinda Jugurtha and Aquilo, who made no speeches, but just offered their "'spectful likewise," whatever that might mean, unless it meant congratulations.

After this tumultuous sub-ceremony the wedding party filed into the breakfast room, followed by all the servants, both men and women, who ranged themselves behind the chairs of the family as so many extra waiters.

It was both a dainty and substantial breakfast, elegantly served.

And as it was now ten o'clock the party were quite ready to do ample justice to the luxuries set before them.

Captain Blantyre cut the bride's cake, which stood on the center of the table, and Master Eustace was the fortunate winner of the mystic ring.

Everyone congratulated him.

Fleurie stooped and whispered that that was a sign he would be the first one married after the present couple.

"Oh! that is a bitter mockery! I shall never marry,"

retorted the young gentleman, with a reproachful glance at Erma.

Evidently Mr. "Rooster" wished to be considered a "blighted being," bravely bearing his fate.

The breakfast was the more prolonged because the rain was still pouring in torrents, rendering it almost impossible for the wedded pair to leave the house, as they had intended to do soon after rising from the table.

"I think it may clear off by noon," said Mr. Gladden, hopefully, as he looked toward the window. "It is coming down too hard to last very long."

It was half-past eleven when they arose from the table.

Erma, attended by her little bridesmaids, retired to her chamber to change her white organdie wedding dress for a black cashmere traveling suit—thus resuming the mourning that she had left off for a few hours only.

She hung up her white dress in the closet, and put veil, wreath and gloves into a handbox, which she placed upon the high shelf of the same place. Then she put the pearl ornaments back into the casket, and put the casket into her traveling satchel.

"Why, you are wearing the very same black dress that you came down here in," said Fleurie, with a look of disapprobation.

"Yes, my dear, it is the only suitable one for a ride that I possess," replied Erma.

"But black for a bride's traveling dress!"

"It does not matter, dear."

"Oh! but it is not lucky. The rain is unlucky enough, without the black dress to make it more unlucky."

"Don't be superstitious, dear."

"I am not; but there's the proverb:

"'Blessèd is the bride that the sun shines on,
Doomèd is the bride when the rain falls down.'"

"And anyway," continued the child, "you need not have taken off your beautiful bridal dress and put on this ugly mourning one yet awhile, for it will be impossible for you to go out in such a storm as this."

"I must be ready to go in case the rain should hold up at noon, as Mr. Gladden thinks it will," Erma explained.

At that moment Mrs. Blantyre entered the room to add her expostulations to those of the children.

"I should have come up before, my dear, but I had to stay behind to cut up the remainder of the wedding cake, and distribute it among the colored folks—even to send out pieces to the field hands."

"Yes, I know how it was at your own wedding, madam. Miss Mesh and myself were kept busy at the same work for some time after you had left."

"But, my dear, I don't see why you should have changed your dress. You cannot leave in this rain."

"I must be ready to avail myself of the first pause in the storm; and, by the way, my dear Mrs. Blantyre, I have left my dress, and some other garments, in this closet, if you will please to give them house-room for a day or two, until I can send for them."

"Certainly, my dear Erma," said the lady.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BRIDE'S HOME.

Oh, who can tell the gloom
Of solitude like this?
No sound doth ever reach his ear
Save of the passing wind.
The river's everlasting flow,
The forest in the gale,
The pattering of the shower,
Sounds dead and mournful all. —SOUTHEY.

The clouds were heavier and darker, the rain poured down thicker and faster than ever, as the ladies and children reappeared in the drawing room, where they found the three gentlemen standing in a group at the window, discussing the unusual inclemency of the weather.

"I hope your carriage is under cover, Wolfsohn. Otherwise it will be quite unfit to occupy. I will ring and ascertain," Mr. Gladden was saying, as he touched the bell.

Aquilo answered the summons, and to his master's inquiry replied:

"The carriage was ordered at eleven, sir; but it has poured down so hard, Uncle Jug thought he better not get it out till it stopped, 'cause de carriage was put up when Mr. Wol'so'n first come," Quil explained.

"Of course! Quite right! Now, let it stay where it is until further orders," was Mr. Gladden's final direction.

The boy withdrew.

"There! I do believe it is clearing off!" exclaimed Mr. Gladden, pointing to a rift in the dark cloud, though the rain fell faster than ever.

"Yes, and this is the clearing-up shower," added Capt. Blantyre.

And so it seemed.

Half an hour longer of flooding rain, and the clouds seemed to have expended themselves, and the sun came out.

Mr. Wolfsohn's carriage was ordered.

The large trunk and the little bag were brought down, the former strapped on behind the carriage and the latter put inside.

Erma, who had sat some time with her bonnet on, was quite ready; but not until Rodolph Wolfsohn came to her and murmured:

"Now, dear, I wait for you," did she arise and take leave of her friends.

Only in bidding adieu to the children did she shed any tears. She kissed Fleurie and Fance, but when she would have kissed Eustace, that young gentleman whispered fiercely:

"I warned you not to do that again! I don't want a row with Wolfsohn!"

"I'll tell you what, my dear; the next governess I engage shall be an old and ugly one! I don't see the fun of bringing a young lady down here to educate my children and then having her carried off from me in less than twelve months!" said Mrs. Blantyre, as she returned the parting embrace of Erma.

"Have you heard of anyone yet likely to suit the description, dear Mrs. Blantyre?" inquired the bride, smiling a little.

"Perhaps! At least, a lady old enough! whether she will be ugly enough remains to be seen. I only heard of her through a letter received this morning; but if we come to an agreement, she will be with us on June 1st. Good-by, then, since you are off," said the kindly Susan

Blantyre, once more embracing Erma before she let her go.

Rodolph Wolfsohn was at the same time shaking hands with everyone.

He then led forth his bride, followed by all the family, and all the household servants.

An old-fashioned traveling carriage stood before the door, with Erma's trunk strapped on behind it, and a venerable, old, white-haired negro coachman standing beside it, hat in hand.

This old man wore what looked suspiciously like a well-brushed, castoff, black dress suit of his master's, and a large white rose in his button hole.

He bowed low to his master and very low to his master's young wife, as he opened the carriage door.

Rodolph Wolfsohn put his bride in and followed her.

The coachman closed the door and mounted the box.

In a few minutes more the bridegroom and the bride were seated in the comfortable old coach, on their way home.

A shower of old shoes was flung by the children and the servants, to speed them on their way.

The front and side windows of the old coach were down. The sky seen through them was not quite clear, but cloudy and sunny, like an April day. The foliage and herbage of the rolling, wooded hills and vales were green and dripping from the morning's heavy rains.

All this Erma noticed as the carriage rolled out of the white gates of Brighthome, and turned down the wooded parks leading to the vale below.

There was not a human dwelling in sight. All the landholders in this district preferred to build their dwelling houses in the valleys, where they were sheltered by the hills from the high winds of winter and shaded by the woods from the burning heat of summer.

Mr. Gladden's house of Brighthome was the only exception to this rule. He had built his mansion on a high hill.

The newly married pair had ridden on in silence for the first few minutes, but soon after they had passed the gates of Brighthome, Rodolph, who held Erma's hand closely clasped in his, whispered:

"Love, I am very happy to-day. Almost too happy. To think that I am taking you home with me, forever and ever my own. I can scarcely believe it. Are other married pairs as blessed as we are? Oh, Erma, if so, what a glorious world this must be under all its merely superficial little miseries!"

She raised her dark-blue eyes to his and smiled without speaking.

He pressed his lips to the other lips that were his dearer own, and continued:

"We shall have plenty of what the world would call cares and trials, hardships and privations, but we shall never be the less happy for all these external—merely external things. We will not let them trouble our peace and love and our joy in each other. Shall we, Erma?"

"No, not the least in the world. I do not care how poor we may be, how plainly we may have to live, or how hard we may have to work—if there is any work that we can do, Rodolph."

"Erma, I work and have worked among my own few laborers, ever since I came into this debt-burdened property. Heaven forbid that I should let you toil."

"But I will! But I will! Oh, I shall be so much happier to work, Rodolph! If you toil in the field I will toil in the house."

"Nay, sweet Erma! On man alone was laid the duty of earning his bread by the sweat of his brow—not on woman. It shall be my pride and joy to shield you from all hardship of that sort, dear girl. We are not in danger of destitution, dear Erma. Our estate is so burdened with mortgages that unless they are paid off they must swamp the property. In the short time that I have been in possession, I have cleared off two."

She was looking at him so attentively, only in listening to him, that he suddenly stopped, laughed, caught her in his arms, and kissed her ardently before he could go on.

"It was through my poor mother's unfortunate second marriage that our estate was nearly ruined, Erma!"

"Your dear mother was married twice?"

"Yes, love. My mother was the heiress of Darkwood, and a beautiful woman. She first married my father, whose name was the same as my own—Rodolph Wolf-

sohn. Ah! he only lived four years after that marriage, and then fell a victim to one of our terrible Southern fevers, leaving my mother a youthful widow, with but one child—myself, aged two years. Of course, I do not remember my own father."

"Oh, Rodolph!"

"My mother remained a widow for three years; but her nature was much too affectionate to continue in that state, sought as she must have been by some of the most worthy and attractive men in the county."

"Oh, I do not know how anyone can ever dream of marrying a second time!" said Erma, earnestly.

"No, of course, you do not, love! Nor do I wish you ever should!" exclaimed the young man, with a happy smile, as he caught her hand and pressed it to his lips.

"Tell me some more."

"I said that I could not recollect my own dear father, no more than I can recollect the time that I did not know my stepfather. My mother married him about three years after my father's death, and when I was about five years old. I remember the courtship and marriage, little as I understood it at the time."

"Poor boy!"

"My stepfather came to live at my mother's patrimonial estate, Darkwood. He was a handsome, attractive, graceless scamp. Yes, I must say that, Erma, even if he was my stepfather."

"Did he ill use you when you were a child, Rodolph?" inquired the young girl.

"Oh, no; he was not ill-tempered—at least, not with children. But he was idle, improvident and fond of pleasure. He never had any children of his own, and perhaps that was the reason why he spent so much of his time away from home. As for me, I was always glad when he went."

"No wonder!"

"I said he was not ill-tempered with children; but he was high-spirited and scornful to grown people, and when he was excited by wine—and it took very little to craze him—he was quarrelsome to an extreme degree."

"Like Shakespeare's hero—

"'He would pick a quarrel for a straw
And fight it out to the extremity,"

said Erma.

"Exactly. And it ended fatally for him at last. But I am getting before my story. When I was thirteen years old I was sent to a preparatory school, where I remained until I was eighteen. Then I was sent to college, where I graduated after four years. Finally, I traveled in Europe for three years, and then returned home for good."

"Had you not seen your mother in all this time?"

"Oh, yes, dear; twice every year until I went to Europe. I used to meet my mother and stepfather at some fashionable watering place every summer during the vacations, and I used to spend every Christmas at home. Meantime my stepfather had, in the course of his twenty years' marriage with my mother, run through every cent of his own property, and made deep inroads into hers. He had raised money whenever he wanted it by coaxing or bullying her into mortgaging her house and land."

"He was the cause of your present embarrassments, then?"

"Of course. After my final return from Europe I found my poor mother worn out, and dying of some inward disease, aggravated, if not made incurable, by worrying anxiety."

"Poor mother!"

"Yes, poor mother! She told me she was glad that she was going, because, if she lived, my stepfather would never let her rest until he had run through all her property, that ought to be the inheritance of her only son. She told me she had made her will, and had lodged it in the hands of old Mr. Clement Gladden. In that will she said she had bequeathed Darkwood to me; but that the estate, she feared, was mortgaged up to its full value. She could not leave me anything else but just the land and the improvements on it; everything else—negroes, cattle, horses, stock, carriages and even house furniture being personal property, not secured to her by any marriage settlement, though it was her very own, having been inherited from her parents and my grandparents—fell to her husband, my stepfather."

"Oh, but that was very unjust."

"It was the law. Well, dear, in a few days my mother grew so very much worse that my stepfather was summoned from New Orleans, where he was spending his time in his pleasures. He came home looking as handsome, attractive and graceless at fifty years of age as he had looked at thirty, when he had married my mother. He seemed pleased to see me and very much affected to find my mother so ill."

"I should have thought that he would have been overwhelmed with remorse," said Erma, indignantly.

"I do not think he had the moral sense to appreciate the situation. My mother soon passed to her eternal home. And then I found out that, notwithstanding my mother's will, the law gave my stepfather a life interest in Darkwood, as well as full possession of all her personal property."

"Oh, Rodolph!"

"He could even have ordered me out of my own house had he chosen to do so."

"Oh, Rodolph!" she once more exclaimed, in a voice full of sympathy.

"But he was not evil enough to do that; and, besides, he had no further power to sink the estate any deeper under mortgages. He could raise no more money on it, and he wanted money, so he sold the most valuable of the negroes and the best of the stock, raised a few thousand dollars, and left the neighborhood."

Erma, listening attentively, gave a sigh of relief, as if an incubus had been lifted from her lungs.

"I stayed on at Darkwood some months longer, until frightful news came of my stepfather. He had been killed in a row!"

The young bride shuddered through all her frame.

"It was a terrible thing, Erma; but I should be a hypocrite if I were to say that I was sorry. He was my stepfather, but he had broken my mother's heart and squandered her son's inheritance. Erma, I found myself in possession of a large estate burdened with mortgages, a vast plantation without laborers to work it, or cattle to stock it; a large house, without furniture enough to make it half comfortable."

"But you met the difficulty. I heard of that."

"My dear, I hired a few negro men, and I went to work myself and worked with them. I have only just begun to clear the estate. And, Erma, I have dared to bring you to such a home and to such a life as mine!" he said, taking her hand and clasping it warmly.

She held his hand to her heart, as she whispered, earnestly:

"The only home and the only life I wish for on this earth!"

He answered her with a warm caress.

They had been going slowly up and down the wooded hills and dales that we have described as the features of this district.

Erma had withdrawn her attention from the face of the country to give it wholly to her husband's story.

Now they were winding slowly down a wooded road, leading from the brow of a hill to a deep, narrow, wooded valley below, along the bottom of which ran a sluggish stream, of whose waters they could catch an occasional glimmer.

From the midst of the trees near this stream the gable ends and chimneys of a house could be seen.

"Look, love! There is our home. There is Darkwood," said Rodolph, pointing to the place.

Erma looked out with curiosity and interest; but she had scarcely taken in the view when she was compelled to draw in her head.

The sky that had during their drive been full of clouds and sunshine now suddenly darkened, and the rain fell in torrents, and the falling shower obscured the landscape.

The horses went on at a good pace, winding down through the thick and dripping woods, and then along the borders of the sluggish stream that now, seen near, proved to be a wider and a deeper one than appeared from a distant and partial view.

"This is Low River, my dear, and it flows past the foot of our garden," Rodolph explained, as the carriage turned from the banks and entered a wooded road on the left, that led them to a gate, through which they entered the neglected grounds of Darkwood.

The mansion was a large, dark, square stone building, nearly hidden in a thick grove of oak and elm and chest-

nut trees, all in the midst of a lawn dotted over with other gigantic forest trees, and dappled with thickets of untrimmed shrubs.

The weed-grown carriage drive led straight from the gate to the stone portico of this grim house.

The carriage was drawn up.

Rodolph Wolfsohn sprang out and hoisted an umbrella and gave his hand to his bride.

"Welcome home, my dearest," he said. "I would that this were a palace to which I were bringing you, instead of what it is!"

"My husband's home is my palace," she answered, "and he is my king."

He pressed her hand as he hurried her through the pouring rain into the house.

The door was held open by an aged and intensely black and shriveled little negro woman, in a red calico dress and white apron and neck handkerchief, and whose little, withered face looked like a dried prune under her white, cotton turban.

The little creature had a sweet, humble, patient expression in her small, dark face, as she stood courtesying and continuing to courtesy, that at once attracted Erma's affection.

Mr. Wolfsohn opened a door on the right of the broad, stone-paved hall, and said:

"Go in there, love, and rest while I see to having your luggage brought in. Attend your mistress, Araminta."

Erma entered a large room having four tall windows—two in front and two on the side, for it was a corner room. These windows were curtained with faded yellow moreen, which a recent washing seemed to have faded still more.

At the back of the room was a broad fireplace, in which, though the month was May, a bright pine-wood fire was burning to correct the dampness. Over the fireplace a tall mantelpiece of black walnut, and a pair of silver candlesticks.

On each side of this chimney were two glass-doored cases reaching from floor to ceiling. They were both filled with old books.

Black, horsehair-covered chairs and sofas were ranged in order around the room.

A tall mirror, in a tarnished gilt frame, hung between the front windows. A small, black-walnut table stood beneath it.

A large round table, covered with a faded yellow cloth, stood in the middle of the room. On it were displayed some half-dozen of the best-preserved books, and a pile of old-fashioned daguerrotypes in small, square, morocco cases.

Poor and plain as was the place, there was an air of antiquity and domestic interest, as well as of purity and cleanliness, that charmed Erma, and of which the sweet-spirited little black woman seemed a part.

Erma stood by the center table, idly taking up the books and looking at them. "Wirt's Flora's Dictionary," in crimson and gold; "Heath's Book of Beauty," in blue; "Waverly Gems," in brown—all popular gift books of the past.

She put them down and took up one of the daguerreotypes.

Family daguerreotypes are always interesting, and these, probably of her husband's family, no member of whom, except himself, she had ever seen, were doubly interesting to Erma.

"Whose likeness is this?" she inquired of the meek little black woman.

"Dat, ma'am, is my dear, lubby mist'ess what is in hebben," replied the latter, in so sweet a manner that Erma turned to look at her and then inquired:

"What is your name, aunty?"

"Airyminty, mist'ess, Airyminty. Dough they do call me Minty, 'cause Airyminty is too much name for me; so it is Minty, my mist'ess," said the humble creature, with a little dip of a courtesy.

"And this was my husband's dear mother! I might have known it by the likeness. What a beautiful woman she was!" murmured Erma, gazing at the half-faded-out shadow of a face. She continued to contemplate it for some time, turning it this way and that to get a better view. Finally she pressed it to her lips, closed the case and laid it down.

"And whose is this?" she inquired, taking up and opening another case and looking on the pictured features of a gloriously handsome man.

"Dat one, mist'ess? Le's see. Dat was my dear mist'ess' second husband," replied Minty, peeping over her mistress' hand to look at the picture.

"Oh!" exclaimed Erma, gazing with more interest at the shadowy face, as she turned toward the light.

"What was his name, aunty?" she inquired, softly, as she remembered that by some strange omission Rodolph Wolfsohn, through all his relation, had not mentioned it, nor had she even thought to ask it. "What was Mr. Wolfsohn's stepfather's name?"

"His name, mist'ess? Why, it was Mr. Gustave Perlemonte."

"What?" cried Erma, with wildly dilating eyes. "What did you say it was?"

"Mr. Gustave Perlemonte."

"Gustave Perlemonte!"

"Yes, mist'ess."

"Oh, angels have pity on me! Fate closes around me! Shall I go mad? My husband's murdered stepfather—Gustave Perlemonte!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE HAUNTING TERROR.

In each low wind methinks a spirit calls,
And more than echoes talk along the walls. —POPE.

"Yes, mist'ess, it was an awful thing. But don't take on so, my dear young mist'ess. Marster, he didn't, even when he fust heerd it. Don't take on so, mist'ess. Here, take a drink of water," said the meek little black woman, totally mistaking the cause of Erma's emotion, and believing that the fate of her husband's stepfather only occasioned it.

Erma, feeling sure that the housekeeper must have only imperfectly heard her own incautious words, struggled to control her emotion, and accepted the proffered glass of water.

She had scarcely drunk it and returned the tumbler, when Rodolph Wolfsohn re-entered the room, smiling.

"What! Have you not been relieved of your damp clothing yet, Erma? Araminta! Is there a fire in your mistress' room?"

"Yes, marster."

"Then show her up to it at once—Erma, dear, your trunk has just been sent up," said Rodolph, as he began to divest himself of a light summer overcoat that was dripping wet.

Erma followed the little housekeeper out into the hall and up a broad flight of stairs to an upper hall, where she opened a side door leading into a large front bedchamber, directly over the room that they had left below, and corresponding to it in every particular, having two front and two side windows, and a chimney place in the back wall, flanked by closets in the recesses.

A large bed stood with its head between the front windows and its foot to the fireplace. A dressing bureau stood between the side windows, and a three-cornered washstand stood in the angle of the wall between the front and back windows. Two easy-chairs and other chairs stood about. Windows, bedsteads, sofa and easy-chairs were all draped with white dimity.

There was no carpet on the floor; but a faded Brussels rug was laid down before the fire.

Erma's large trunk stood in the middle of the floor.

"Which if you will gib me de keys, mist'ess, I will unpack your close and put 'em away, and hab de big trunk took up in de garret, outen your sight," said the little old creature.

"I thank you, Aunt Minty; but—is there no younger woman than you to do that?" inquired Erma, looking pityingly at the little, fragile black form.

"La, no, mist'ess, dere's no one 'bout de place to wait on you and marster 'cept 'tis me and poor Sept."

"'Sept'?"

"Him as drove de carriage and fotch up your trunk. Leastways helped marster to fotch it up, 'cause poor Sept never could o' lift it by hisse'f."

"And is Sept your husband?"

"No, mist'ess."

"Your brother, then?"

"No, mist'ess, no kin to me. Only fellow servants all

our lives, as our daddies and mammies were long afore us."

"Well, then, Aunt Minty, since there is no other younger woman to help me with this unpacking, I suppose I must trouble you, although I do not like to do so," said Erma as she drew off her gloves and laid off her hat and sack, and knelt down before the trunk.

She opened it, took out the first tray, which contained folded dresses, and carried it and emptied its contents on the top of the bed, saying:

"There, Aunt Minty, you can hang these dresses up in the closet for me, if you please."

"Yes, mist'ess, wid all de pleasure in life."

While the old negro woman was carefully engaged in this work, Erma returned with the empty tray in her hand to the trunk.

She put it down and took out the lower trays and boxes, all of which she carried to the bed and emptied, and then brought back to the trunk.

When finally she had taken out all the contents except the mysterious box, at the sight of which she again shuddered, she carefully replaced all the empty cases, boxes and trays, and securely locked the trunk with her patent key, and strapped it strongly, saying:

"There, Aunt Minty, this is ready to be taken up into the attic, and I am ready to help you put away those things."

"Berry well, mist'ess. Me and Sept will take it up into de garret soon as I get done here," replied Minty, as she smoothed out a black silk dress preparatory to hanging it up in the closet.

"And you two old people do all the work of this house?"

"Yes, mist'ess, 'cept when marster helps, and he do help a great deal more dan we likes to see, but he will do it."

"And so will I, Aunt Minty. Don't think that I have come here to give you more trouble, poor, dear woman, but to help you as much as I can."

"Laws, mist'ess, if so be you was to gib me double and thribble work, I shouldn't think it no trouble. I is so glad my dear young marster has fotched home a sweet young

wife to comfort him. We'll do de best we can, Sept and me will, to sarve bofe of you, mist'ess."

"I am sure you will. This old house, so perfectly clean and orderly, shows what you do. But I will help you henceforth. The burden must not rest entirely upon you, at your age."

"It didn't use to be so, my mist'ess. Dere was plenty ob maid servants and men servants, too, in de time ob de ole Lovels, which was my mist'ess' maiden name, an' de time ob de Wolfsohns, too, which was her fus' husban's name—Marster Rodolph's father's name—but eberyfing turned roun' when she married Mr. Gustave Perlemonte."

At the sound of that ill-omened name Erma shuddered, in spite of all her efforts to command herself.

The little old negro woman, fairly started on her topic, went on, unconscious of Erma's emotion, and innocent of any malice in her narrative of wrongs.

"I had a husband—poor Charley. We was married very young. He was eighteen an' I fifteen. An' we libbed togedder ten years, an' had seben chillun—five gals an' two boys—de oldest and de youngest was boys, an' de oders was gals. We nebber expected to be parted 'cept by death; for you see, mist'ess, de Lovels and de Wolfsohns, too, would as soon fink ob selling one ob deir own chillun as one ob deir colored people which had libbed long o' dem, parents to chillun, from generation to generation—you know, mist'ess?"

"Yes, I understand you, Aunt Minty."

"Well, mist'ess, fus' my husband, poor Charley, went."

"Went? How?"

"Soon arter my young mist'ess' second marriage to Mr. Perlemonte, he wanted money, and he sold my poor Charley, which was a fine young man of twenty-eight den, and fetched five hundred dollars. Sold him, mist'ess, 'way from me and de chillun to a trader, which took him to de Souf, and we nebber heerd noffin ob him."

"Oh, my poor, poor Minty! Could not your mistress—could not Mrs. Perlemonte have prevented that?"

"No, honey, she couldn't. All pussenal property, 'cludin' her cullered people, becomed hissen arter de marriage, 'cordin' to law. No, honey, she couldn't help ob it. She cried as hard as me and de chillun did; but Mr. Per-

lemonte, he only laughed, and told me to get anodder husband, as Charley would be sure to find anodder wife. But, mist'ess, I nebber forgot Charley, and it was my comfort to know that he had sarved the Lord from his youth up, and if I nebber seed nor heerd from him in dis world, I should see him in de next, and dat ain't far off now, mist'ess."

"No, every day brings you nearer to the meeting with your Charley," said Erma, tenderly.

"It do, mist'ess, and wid my poor chillun, too, for, dough me an' Charley is like to get home first, in de course of nature, de chillun will come in time, an' we shall all be united at last in His house, nebber to part no more. No, bless my Lord! Nebber to part no more! Nebber to weep no more!" said old Minty, clasping her slender, black fingers together, tremulously.

"Where are your children, aunty?" inquired Erma, in a low, sympathetic tone.

"De Lord knows, mist'ess. De Lord, He knows whar dey is. I don't. He has got dem in His keeping. Dat's enough for me. My chillun was took from me, mist'ess, same as my husband was."

"Sold?"

"Yes, mist'ess."

"All of your children?"

"Ebery one ob dem, mist'ess; ebery one ob dem, boy an' gal, one after de odder, fast as dey growed up, was sold away from me to s'ply money for Mr. Perlemonte. Firs' Charley, named arter his father, was sold when he was no more'n seventeen year ole. I thought my heart would break den, mist'ess, but it didn't! it didn't! My poor mist'ess, she took it as hard as I did. It made her ill for a week. My only comfort was still de thought that I had fotch up young Charley to sarve de Lord like his father 'fore him, and if we didn't meet in dis world, we would surely meet in de next. And one little hope I had —dat maybe young Charley might meet 'long of his father out yonder, Souf; but when I 'sidered how wide de world was, dat little hope went away."

"Oh, Aunt Minty!" breathed Erma, in a voice full of sympathy.

"Mist'ess, I hadn't done crying after my boy 'fore Mr.

Perlemonte up and sold my oldest darter, a pretty gal ob sixteen. Mist'ess, I thought when my husband was sold away from me nothing ebber could hurt me as bad in this world. And den when my poor boy was sold I thought my heart would break. But, mist'ess, dem two was men, and so dey couldn't be put upon and ill-treated as bad as a poor, weak gal could. And so, when dey sold my little Minty, my lamb——"

Here this poor Rachel broke down and wept convulsively.

Erma went to her and took the bowed head to her own bosom, and wiped the streaming tears from the withered black face.

"Dere, young mist'ess, you's good. Nebber mind, mist'ess. It's all ober now, or soon will be. I ain't give way and cried as much as that—no, not since my last boy, little Len, was sold away from me! Well, my good young mist'ess, I needn't tell you all about ebery single one of dem separate. 'Nuff to say dey was all sold, one after anodder, soon as dey got to be sixteen or seventeen year old. Hardly got done crying for one afore anodder was took. Husban' and seven chillun! Oh, mist'ess, if any heart could be broke eight times, mine was! If anyone could die eight deaths, I did!"

"I can well believe it, my poor Minty."

"If de Lord had took 'em all, mist'ess, I shouldn't 'a grieved so much, 'cause dey was all sarving de Lord, and I'd a knowed as He took 'em to Hisself. But to know dey was sold to slavery among strangers, and not even altogedder, but scattered ober de land! It was bery hard to bear!"

"It was, indeed, my poor Minty! But I see that the Lord has helped you to bear it."

"He has, mist'ess. And I do think He gave me this thought, which has comforted me bery often, dat dough I dunno whar my poor husband and chillun is, all scattered apart, He do! And dough I can't watch ober dem, nor comfort dem, He will! And as He sees us all, and as we are in de hollow of His hand, we is all safe, and not so much parted as we 'pears to be."

"Your belief is as true as it is beautiful, Minty."

"And, mist'ess, dere is anodder thing. I dreams ob

'em so often and so plain! Seems as if I was wid 'em all in my dreams. I sees 'em so plain. I talks wid 'em so free!"

"No doubt you do, Minty."

"It was a comfort to me, young mist'ess. But my poor ole mist'ess, she took it all hard as I did, and it told on her worse because she was more delicate dan I was. Laws, young mist'ess, it warn't de squanderin' of her money, nor de mortgagin' ob de house and land, nor it wa'n't de drinking and de gamblin' and de riotous livin' what broke poor old mist'ess' heart and killed her—it wa'n't dat! It was just de deep trouble fotched on her poor colored people as she wasn't able to help. Dat's what fotch my mist'ess' gray hairs down in sorrow to de grave, 'fore she was fifty year old. 'Cause, you see, it wasn't only me as suffered, but all de rest ob us. Poor ole Sept had his young wife and darters by his first ole wife 'reft away from him! Ah, how she used to cry! My poor mist'ess! I had seen heaps o' trouble myself, but de day I closed my dear ole mist'ess's eyes I was sort of happy for her sake! And now, as you has come to comfort poor Master Rodolph, I'll try to be happy and thankful for your sakes, mist'ess."

"And we will try to make you comfortable and contented for the remainder of your life, Aunt Minty."

"And poor Sept, too, mist'ess?"

"Yes, and poor Sept, too."

While they had been talking they had not ceased to work; Erma folding and putting away linen in the bureau drawers, old Minty smoothing and hanging up dresses in the closet. Erma got through first, and then she changed her black cashmere dress for a white organdie, sprigged with black leaves and trimmed with black ribbons.

Before she had quite finished the bell rang.

"It is for dinner, honey. Sept, he had charge ob putting de dinner on de table."

Erma only stopped to take two tea roses from a bouquet, that some kind hand had placed upon her dressing table, and put one in the meshes of her black hair and the other in the folds of the black bow on her bosom.

While she was still doing this, a rap was heard at her chamber door, and the voice of her husband calling out:

"Are you ready, dear Erma? I have come to show you the way to the dining room."

Erma opened the door and went out to join him.

The old woman called gently after her:

"I'll put away de rest ob de things, as careful as if you was a-lookin', mist'ess."

"I am sure you will, Minty," replied Erma, as her husband drew her arm within his own, and conducted her downstairs.

He took her into a large dining room, back of the parlor into which she had first been introduced, and whose chief recommendation was its pure cleanliness. The uncarpeted floor was as white as pine wood could be made; the unpapered walls as white as lime could render them. Curtains of buff linen shaded the four windows, two at the side, two at the back. Opposite the back windows was the wide fireplace, with a little, cheerful blaze of light pine wood, just enough to correct the dampness and to counteract the gloom. Against the partition wall, dividing the dining room from the passage, was a vast antique sideboard of mahogany, whose many drawers, cupboard and brackets once boasted a wealth of silver, cut glass and Bohemian ware, all of which had been sold under the hammer, when Gustave Perlemonte put up his wife's personal property at auction. The sideboard, like other remaining articles, had been left, because it could not find a purchaser, or, perhaps, it had been bought in, as some other needful articles had been, by Rodolph Wolfsohn himself. The half-dozen cane-bottomed, buff-colored chairs and the round dining table completed the furniture.

Rodolph Wolfsohn led his wife to the head of the table and took his own seat.

The dinner was an exquisite one, prepared by old Aunt Minty, a trained cook of the Wolfsohn family, assisted by Uncle Septimus, who, like most of his race, possessed a decided talent for the culinary art.

After dinner they went into the front parlor, which was lighted by two long spermaceti candles set in tall brass candlesticks at each end of the mantelpiece, and by a large lamp set on the center table.

They sat down opposite each other, between this table and the fire.

Then Rodolph Wolfsohn took up the daguerreotypes one by one to show his wife and tell her all that was interesting in connection with them.

"This is my dear mother's likeness. It was taken in Washington city soon after her second marriage—during the wedding tour, in fact," he said, as he put the worn morocco case in her hands.

"Yes; I saw this when I first came into the house. What a beautiful woman she was!" said Erma, gazing admiringly on the picture.

"Yes, she was beautiful even at forty-five, when, worn out with grief and illness, she passed away," replied Rodolph, with a sigh.

They looked at the picture, passing it from hand to hand, and talked of the departed mother some time longer, and then Rodolph took up another case, opened it and passed it over to his wife, saying, bitterly:

"That was her second husband, my stepfather, who wrought all her ruin and mine!"

"Yes—oh! I don't want to look at it, please! I saw it once," she cried, with a shudder.

"How sensitive you are, sweet wife!" he said, as he closed the case and put it on the table.

And then, instead of showing her other daguerreotypes, he glided into speaking further of his stepfather, and before Erma could find any way of deprecating the horrible subject, he was in the midst of the story of the homicide.

"The man got his deserts at length," he said, noticing that Erma had turned her face to the fire and applied her vinaigrette to her nose, but not connecting the action with his own words.

"It happened in this manner, and about this time last year. He was on a coast steamer bound from Charleston, South Carolina, to New York. It was night and they were nearing New York bay. Some men were playing cards in the saloon. He was seated at a table with an inexperienced young man with whom he had been playing since the lamps were lighted, and whom he soon 'cleaned out,' to use his own frequent expression, and

whom he left not only penniless, but despairing and on the verge of suicide; for it transpired the fool had been gambling with money not his own, but intrusted to him by his employers. I am telling you these forerunning events of the tragedy as they came to light at the subsequent trial, Erma."

"Yes," she breathed, in a voice scarcely above her breath, as she kept her face sedulously toward the fire, and held the reviving spirits of ammonia to her nose.

"To go on, then. When he had emptied the pockets of the wretched young idiot, he arose from the table, and, declaring that it was too hot to remain below, he went on deck.

"A gentleman who had watched his play and detected, or thought he had detected, some unfairness in it, followed him to the deck and came up to him where he was standing in the bows quite alone. There, with as much caution and delicacy as the ugly subject would admit of, he began to talk to the gambler. First, without mentioning any of his own discoveries, he merely said that the weak young man had risked and lost not only his own money, but that of his employer, and that if it were not returned he would not only have lost the money, but would lose character and position as well, if not even his personal liberty by a criminal prosecution. Erma, my dear, you do not listen to me," said Rodolph Wolfsohn, breaking off on observing that his wife's eyes were closed, as if she were half asleep. "You do not listen to me."

"Oh, I do! I do!" she moaned.

"It is a painful subject, my dear. I regret now that I entered upon it; but it need not be resumed between us ever after this night."

"No," she breathed.

"The gambler laughed aloud at the absurd proposal to restore his winnings to the ruined loser. He said if the young man had played with money not his own it was his lookout, and he must take the consequences. Then it was that the poor fellow's advocate told the gambler what he had discovered—the tricks and shifts by which the money had been won. The swindler gave him the lie. The gentleman coolly threatened to expose him.

The gambler hurled the most opprobrious epithets upon the other. This gentleman then lost his reason and his self-control. He was a tall, muscular and powerful man. He seized his antagonist in the midst of his torrent of blasphemy and obscenity and pitched him headlong into the sea. He sank like a stone. He was drowned before rescue could reach him."

"Oh-h-h!" groaned Erma, covering her eyes with her hands, as if she wished to shut out the sight imagination had called up.

"There, my dear, I will say no more. I should not have told you of all this. Come, now, try to compose yourself. There is the tea bell. A cup of tea will revive you."

CHAPTER XIV.

A STARTLING ENCOUNTER.

A good woman;
But, when she is enraged, grows furious—
Ay, and quite dangerous—out of all reason,
Her wrath doth so transport her. —BEN JOHNSON.

She is the infernal Até in female apparel.
—SHAKESPEARE.

The day after the wedding was as splendid a day as usually succeeds a summer storm.

The sky was intensely blue, the earth vividly green. Low River, just below the house, was full and high that morning. The roses, the only flowers that could flourish under such neglect as they had suffered, were full of half-blown buds and sparkling with raindrops.

In the house old Septimus was stepping lightly from room to room, opening window shutters, drawing up blinds, removing brands and ashes from the fireplaces, and replacing them with thick, fragrant pine and cedar boughs, for no fire was needed on this bright and beautiful morning—and placing bouquets of rich, odorous red and white roses on the mantel shelves, stands and brackets.

Meanwhile Aunt Minty, in the kitchen, was preparing as good a breakfast as her skill and the materials at hand could furnish.

And sometimes the old dusky friends met and spoke

together in whispers of their delight in this fair young bride, their new mistress.

At seven o'clock Mr. Wolfsohn came downstairs, but went immediately out on the grounds and began culling the most beautiful rosebuds for a bouquet. He arranged it and brought it in at the front door just as Erma, in her white morning wrapper and black ribbons, was coming down the stairs.

They met with mutual smiles.

"Oh, how beautiful!" exclaimed Erma, taking the bouquet of roses that he held out to her, and putting it lightly to her lips and nose.

Septimus, seeing his master and mistress ready, rang the breakfast bell, and the young pair went into the breakfast room.

"Oh, how pleasant," murmured Erma, as they entered.

The windows were all open and the shades were half drawn up, letting in the morning air and light, and revealing the grassy lawn, with its clusters of shrubs and rosebushes, rolling down to the banks of Low River, all sprinkled with the raindrops of the late storm, but now sparkling in the light of the morning sunshine; and beyond the narrow stream the green, wooded hills and vales undulating out of sight or fading under the horizon.

Inside the room was decorated with fresh roses, three bouquets on the mantelpiece, three on the sideboard, and one on the dainty breakfast table.

The table stood in the middle of the room, and was furnished with a rich, old-fashioned service of great value, consisting of waiter, urn, tea and coffee pots, sugar bowl and cream jug, besides the smaller accessories of spoons, forks, and so forth.

"Why, what is the meaning of all this, Septimus? Where did these things come from?" inquired Rodolph Wolfsohn, in great surprise, as he recognized his mother's silver set, with the old family arms engraved upon them—a set that he knew had been sold at a great sacrifice in the auction instituted by the late Gustave Perlemonte for the sale of his deceased wife's personal property.

"Yes, sar, which dey was fotch here bery airly dis mornin' by ole Uncle Jugurtha, from Brighthome, say,

wid de compliments of his marster, and a note to you, sar, and a messidge to me which I was to put 'em on de breakfas' table," answered the old man, with a bow.

"This is very strange! Where is the note?"

"Layin' unner your plate, sar."

Mr. Wolfsohn found the note.

"It is addressed to you, my dear," he said, as he passed it over to his wife.

She took it, and, standing close by his side, read it in a low tone.

It was dated, "Brighthome, May 18th," and ran as follows:

"My Dear Erma: If it will give yourself and your husband half as much pleasure to receive your rare old family plate as it gives me to restore it, I shall be delighted. Accept it, my child, with the blessing of an old man and your true friend, "Clement Gladden."

"How like Mr. Gladden!" exclaimed Erma, as tears of gratitude came into her eyes.

"I wondered at his buying that set. Now I know he did it with the intention of restoring it to me on the first opportunity. But ought we to accept this? What do you think, my dear?"

"Oh, yes, Rodolph. What else could we do? You—we could never affront him by returning it," she answered, earnestly.

Rodolph Wolfsohn sank into deep thought. He was as grateful as she was; but the thought of accepting such a present hurt his sense of independence.

"We must write a good, appreciative letter of thanks after breakfast, and then watch for some opportunity of showing our sense of his kindness in some more practical manner," said Erma.

"Indeed, we must."

"It is his wedding present to me, you know, Rodolph, so your pride need take no exception to it, while surely no present could have been better devised. Your mother's old, long-inherited silver. I am delighted to have it, Rodolph, and I should think you would be."

"I am, dearest. I am. Take your seat, Erma, the breakfast is cooling," he said.

They sat down.

Septimus waited on them.

While they were still lingering over their morning meal Aunt Minty appeared at the door and beckoned to Septimus.

He went out into the passage, closing the door after him; but he soon returned with a note in his hand, which he handed to his master, saying:

"Capt. Blantyre's man, Marc Antony, brought it, sir, and is waiting for an answer."

Mr. Wolfsohn took the missive.

It was directed to Mr. and Mrs. Rodolph Wolfsohn, Darkwood.

He opened it, glanced at its contents, and handed it to his wife, saying:

"It is for you to decide, my dear."

The note ran as follows:

"My Dear Rodolph and Erma: Will you come and dine with us on next Saturday, *sans ceremonie?* There will be no one but Miss Barbara Gunn and her nieces and ourselves, unless, perhaps, our new governess, whom we expect next week, should arrive sooner. Write by the messenger, and believe me always your friend,

"Susan Blantyre."

"We will go, Rodolph?"

"Yes, certainly. I do not wish you to live a hermit's life, dear."

"And—already I want to see the children," said Erma, as they arose from the table.

"Especially your wild lover, 'Rooster,'" laughed Rodolph.

"Most especially my devoted lover, Eustace," replied Erma, in the same spirit.

The note of acceptance was written and dispatched by Capt. Blantyre's messenger.

Then a letter of thanks was indited and sent by Septimus to Mr. Clement Gladden.

When this was done, Rodolph Wolfsohn walked out for his morning's inspection of his fields and workmen.

Erma, attended by Aunt Minty, who had now got through her matutinal labors, went all over the old house which was her new home.

The rooms upstairs were, nearly all of them, bare of furniture, except the one appropriated to Erma, and the one opposite across the hall, which old Minty said, as she opened the door, had belonged to her late mistress.

"Dunno what was de reason, honey, but Mr. Perlemonte never 'sturbed dis room nor likewise sold nuffin out'n it. I do reckon he was afeard if he did mist'ess' ghost would haunt him."

"I shouldn't wonder," muttered Erma to herself.

"Anyways, he left it alone, just as she died into it. And Marster Wolfsohn, he nebber could bear to see de room after seeing his dear mother draw her last breaf on dat bed. So since she left it nobody has ebber come into it 'cept me, who has to sweep and dust and air it about once a month to keep it in order."

Erma stood in the middle of the room looking around upon it.

It was certainly the best-furnished one in the house. A blue ingrain carpet was on the floor. Blue French chintz of the same light shade draped the tent bedstead and the four windows, and covered the lounge and the two easy-chairs.

Instead of the open wood fireplace there was a polished steel grate, with silver-plated mountings, and there was a fender to match and a marble mantelpiece adorned with blue Sévres china vases.

Each side the mantelpiece were handsome clothes presses of mahogany.

Between the front windows stood a handsome chest of drawers, surmounted by a broad mirror.

"Dem presses and chesses is full ob treasures, mist'ess. Satin and welwet and brocade dresses which is so rich and strong as dey'd stand on end, dey would so. And Indjy shawls, mist'ess! And lace shawls! And jewels! And dey is all your'n now, young mist'ess. Ebery single one ob dem," said Minty.

"Oh—no—no—no! These are all sacred relics! I could not use them, aunty."

"Hi! why not, mist'ess? Dey's made for use, ain't dey? She what use to wear dem is gone to glory and clothed in a garment of light, and don't 'quire dese poor rags no more. Dey's poor rags 'pared to her hebbenly

raiment, if dey is rich satins and welwet and Indjies. And which is best should have 'em, mist'ess, you or de moths? 'Cause if you don't, dey will, dat's sartin."

"It would seem to be a profanation for me to wear them, Minty."

"No, my young mist'ess. 'Cause why? My dear old mist'ess say to me, on her death, she say: 'I have no sister and no daughter, Minty; so you must save all my best things for my son's wife if he should ever marry, as I hope he will.' And so I has took good care ob 'em. I was mortal 'fraid Mr. Perlemonte would sell 'em 'mong de other things, but I reckon, bad as he was, he would a been ashame' to put his dead wife's close up to auction before all de county gentry. 'Sides which, he was afraid to come inside of dis yere door."

They left the room soon after and looked into several others, which were all bare of furniture, though clean and sweet as rooms could be.

Next they went up into the attic, which was also clean and airy, and contained nothing but a few old trunks, among which was Erma's large Saratoga, with its "skeleton" locked securely within.

"Does anyone often come up here?" inquired Erma, with a shudder.

"Only me once in a while to sweep and scrub to keep things sweet, you kno', mist'ess. 'Cause if I didn't in a ole house like dis de cobwebs and spiders and dust would 'cumulate so nobody could lib into it."

"You are a careful housekeeper, aunty," said Erma, as she turned to leave the attic.

"Which it is my bounden duty to be, mist'ess," answered Minty.

In the lower hall they met Mr. Wolfsohn, in the old, broad-brimmed, black, felt hat that Erma had always thought so becoming to his picturesque dark beauty.

"Put on your things, dear Erma, and come with me for a walk. The dampness has dried off the ground, and we have just time to stroll down by the river before dinner," he said.

Erma ran upstairs for her hat and light mantle.

Minty went into the kitchen to look after the dinner

that she had put on the fire some hours earlier in the day.

Rodolph waited in the front hall for his wife, who presently joined him.

They walked through the shaded lawn down to Low River, a narrow stream, as I said, whose deep banks were thickly grown with eglantines, dog-roses and other creeping and trailing vegetation.

A narrow path ran along the top of the bank, and this they took, turning to the left.

Over the river was a still, undulating country of hill and vale, woods and fields—the hills usually clothed with woods, the vales with waving fields of wheat and rye.

Before them, to the left, far down on the other side of the river, arose the red brick chimneys of a farmhouse hidden in a group of trees.

Rodolph pointed it out to his companion, saying:

"There is the place called 'The Marsh,' where your pupils stayed while the fever was at Brighthome. The Marsh is the property and residence of my old relative, Barbara Gunn, as perhaps you know."

"Oh, yes."

"She is an honest and honorable woman, but with a fearful temper, and a terrible predilection for strong and very objectionable language. If you were to meet her accidentally, my dear, you would mistake her for an old warrior in woman's clothes. However, you will meet her at Blantyre, if she does not call to see us in the meantime," Mr. Wolfsohn explained.

"Of course I shall be very glad to know her, Rodolph," answered Erma.

They strolled on and continued to talk, though their further conversation it is not necessary to repeat.

Soon the heat of the noontide sun warned them to return to the house.

They reached home in good time to rest and change their dress for dinner.

Saturday, the day appointed for their visit to the Blantyres, dawned clear and fine.

They were to go early and spend the whole day, for that was the well-understood custom of the time and neighborhood.

Immediately after breakfast on that morning Rodolph Wolfsohn walked out as usual to see to his fields and workmen, saying as he left the house, that he would be back in an hour.

Erma went up to her room to dress for the little dinner party.

She put on a rich, black silk dress from which she had ripped off the crape trimmings, supplying their place with guipure lace. She wore white crêpe ruffles around her throat and wrists, and a white silk bow on her bosom. Her jewels were the pearl earrings and brooch from the set given her by the family at Brighthome. A black and white silk hat, with a gray grenadine veil and white kid gloves completed her toilet. A white Berlin wool carriage wrap was thrown over her arm, to be worn in case the evening should be chilly for their ride home.

She was quite ready when Rodolph Wolfsohn returned.

"How lovely you look, dear Erma," he whispered, as he ran upstairs to change his own working clothes for the only evening suit he had—his wedding dress.

He did not keep her waiting long, but soon came down again, ready for their ride.

He put her into the carriage, on the box of which old Septimus, in his best suit, sat, holding the reins. He took his seat at her side and the horses started.

The road between Darkwood and Blantyre House was like all the other roads in this hilly and wooded country—through the forest, always up hill and down dale.

It was nearly twelve o'clock when they reached Blantyre.

Blantyre House was a handsome building of white stone, surrounded by outhouses of the same material, all rising from a thick grove of forest trees, in a well-kept park that lay in the midst of a green valley inclosed on all sides by wooded hills.

A white stone wall inclosed the park. An iron gate, hospitably open, admitted the carriage. A wide, graveled drive, between rows of acacia trees in full bloom, took them to the oblong front of the white house, with its double row of windows, and its upper and lower piazzas.

Old Septimus drew up the horses.

Mr. Wolfsohn alighted and handed out his wife.

Capt. Blantyre, who was standing on the steps of the front piazza, came down and cordially greeted the young pair.

"Is Miss Barbara Gunn here?" inquired Rodolph, as soon as he had returned the salutations.

"No——"

"Is she coming?"

"No. I am sorry to say. She sent an excuse—rheumatism."

"I wonder if it is rheumatism or caprice?"

"Heaven knows! She is a queer one, our formidable neighbor."

"Are any of her nieces to be here?"

"No. It is not likely, without herself to chaperon them. Her nieces were included in the excuse sent."

While they talked they had been standing on the piazza, with the hall door wide open to receive them, and a man-servant standing within it to attend them.

Old Septimus had already driven off his carriage toward the stables.

"Oh, by the way, Wolfsohn, my dear fellow, I want you to take a look at something—a lady's horse that I think of buying for my wife. Susan is very fond of riding, you know, and I want her to have a safe horse. This one is here on trial. I wish to have your opinion of him before I decide whether to purchase or not. You are a much better judge of horseflesh than an old salt like me. Will you come now?"

"With pleasure," said Rodolph.

"Will you excuse us, Mrs. Wolfsohn?"

"Certainly," replied Erma.

"You will find Mrs. Blantyre quite anxiously expecting you. Marc Antony! Here! Show this lady into the drawing room and let your mistress know that she has come," said Capt. Blantyre, as, with a bow to Erma, he led the way to the stables, followed by Rodolph Wolfsohn.

Erma crossed the threshold of Blantyre House, preceded by the servant, who opened a door on the right, and held it open for the lady to pass.

She entered a long, lofty double drawing room, with a bay window at each end, and two white marble chimney

pieces surmounted by broad mirrors on the side opposite the hall. The room was elegantly upholstered in blue and white.

At first Erma supposed the place to be untenanted, and she walked toward an inviting easy-chair near the front bay window to seat herself, when, to her surprise, a stout, fair-haired, showy-looking woman, handsomely dressed in white organdie and lace, arose to meet her.

For a moment the two stared at each other in blank amazement.

"Good Heaven! Mrs. Somers!" exclaimed the young bride, turning pale as death.

"Why! is it you?" cried the stout woman, still staring. "You—Erma Her——"

"Hush! For Heaven's sake, hush! I am married. I am the wife of Rodolph Wolfsohn! Oh, for pity's sake, don't denounce me!"

And she sank at the feet of the woman and lifted her clasped hands in prayer.

CHAPTER XV.

COMFORT.

Alas! how is it with you,
When every sound appals? —SHAKESPEARE.

"Rise, Erma! Dear child, arise! What is the meaning of all this alarm?" inquired the stout lady, whom the girl had called Mrs. Somers, and she raised her to her feet.

"Oh, they don't know! They don't know! The people I am with don't know!" cried Erma, wringing her hands.

"Sit down beside me, child, and try to compose yourself, and let me understand, if I can, the cause of your emotion," said the fair matron, bending her large, light-blue eyes kindly on the young lady.

"Oh, Mrs. Somers, I tell you I am here, almost through a deception! Almost through treachery! At least through a profound concealment," cried the girl, wringing her hands.

"Erma!" exclaimed the matron.

"It is true, Mrs. Somers."

"But, my love, how came you here in this neighborhood at all? And married? I do not comprehend it all. Try to be a little coherent, my dear."

"I will try. Well, after—after—it was all over—I had to—find some way—of supporting myself——"

"Yes, I suppose so——"

"And—away from—from the scene of—— Oh! oh! Mrs. Somers!"

"Calm yourself, my dear girl! Yes, I understand that! You had to leave home to seek your living among strangers."

"I—I—yes! And the bishop of the diocese, who had been our friend through the very worst, happened to receive a letter from an old friend of his own, Mr. Clement Gladden, of Brighthome, asking him to look out and find a governess for a family of children. The dear bishop recommended me at once. I was immediately engaged and came down."

"To this place, to Blantyre House?"

"No; to Brighthome, the seat of Mr. Clement Gladden, where Mrs. Blantyre and her children lived, before her second marriage."

"Mrs. Blantyre told me of her having had a young governess, my immediate predecessor, but I supposed it to have been at this house. She called this governess Miss Wildering, and said she had lost her by marriage. I had no suspicion of you, Erma."

"Oh, Mrs. Somers, I told you that they knew nothing of me—nothing! Not even my true name, or the name I bore before my marriage."

"Oh, Erma, and you say Bishop Whiting sent you down, well recommended to his friend, Mr. Gladden."

"Yes."

"Did the bishop approve of your concealments?"

"No."

"Why, then, have you had any from these good friends of yours?"

"Oh, I could not help it. I could not help it at first! Oh, put yourself in my place! Could you have published such a tale to strangers?"

The lady did not answer.

"No, you know you could not, Mrs. Somers! Neither could I!"

"But afterward, Erma? You have lived among these people nearly a year. You have won their confidence and esteem. Why did you not afterward tell them?"

"Because, if it was difficult to speak when they were strangers, and I cared but little for their love, it became impossible—do you hear me?—impossible to tell them, when they grew to be friends, whose affection was necessary to my happiness. Can you not see that this was so—must have been so? Put yourself in my place, and you will see it."

Again the lady answered only by her silence.

"And now you do see it! You know that the longer I kept this secret, the more difficult, the more impossible it became to reveal it."

"But, Erma, my poor child, with this secret in your life, you live, as it were, with the sword of Damocles suspended over your head by a single hair! It may drop with destruction to you at any time!"

"I know it! Oh, I know it! I 'live in the midst of alarms!'" moaned the poor girl.

And the very next moment, as if in proof of her words, she started violently at the opening of the door.

It was only Marc Antony come to say that his mistress would be downstairs in a few minutes, and having said this much, he retired, closing the door behind him.

"Erma, you are married, you tell me."

"To Mr. Rodolph Wolfsohn. Yes!"

"Of course, you have told him your past history, my dear?"

"No. He knows nothing!"

"Good heavens, Erma! You could not have been so mad as to marry a man without telling him?"

"Yes, I was just as mad as that," moaned the girl, in a tone of desperation.

"Heaven of heavens, Erma! What tempted you to such a frenzied act? Do you not know that you live in a powder magazine, with fires all around it, that may explode and blow you to destruction at any moment?"

"I know! I know! I told you 'I live in the midst of alarms,' and I do! Oh, listen! The very morning after

my arrival at Brighthome, word was brought me that a gentleman waited to see me in the parlor. I felt near death. I could think of no one likely to come and seek me out but my one foe. I thought it was he!"

"And it was not, of course?"

"It proved to be only a fellow traveler of mine who had rendered me a service, but who afterward became my dearest friend, and is now my husband."

"You poor child!"

"That was my first fright. A week later, a lady visitor at Brighthome suddenly asked me at the dinner table if I knew anyone in New York of the name of 'Herne.' All eyes were on me. The room suddenly turned upside down with me, and I lost consciousness."

"You poor, poor girl."

"My third alarm came from Capt. Blantyre. That was the worst. That was the worst! I really thought that would have deprived me of my reason. He was mixed up in the whole of that terrible secret, as much as I myself. I did not suspect it at all. I had traveled with him in the same stagecoach from Staunton to Ice Cliff without suspecting anything. I had met him day after day when he was paying his addresses to Mrs. Fleetwood, without suspecting his connection with my life's tragedy until, the day after the unfortunate question was put to me at the dinner table, he sought and found an opportunity to reveal his position to me, beginning by saying that he knew why the sudden mention of the name of 'Herne' had overwhelmed me."

"Oh, Erma! And you have a secret in common with this man, which you cannot confide to your husband?"

"Yes. Oh, woe is me! Yet I could not help it. I did not tell Capt. Blantyre. He was himself as deeply involved as any of us. But let me go on. My fourth shock came in the form of a wedding present. A box was brought into my bedroom on the morning of my wedding day. It was opened by the manservant, who, after taking off the top, stepped aside. I knelt down and removed some waste paper, straw, more paper, then raw cotton wool and linen, expecting to find some pretty vase or picture, when—— Oh, my heart!"

"What is it, then, Erma?"

"A sight to freeze my blood to ice. Do not ask me what. I cannot tell you. I hastily put back all the linen, cotton wool, waste paper and straw, and made the manservant screw down the lid again. There it shall remain until I get an opportunity, unwatched, of committing it to the earth."

"Who could have sent you any object to distress you so much?"

"But one man in the world, my only foe!"

"Then I can readily imagine what it was he sent you! The ruthless miscreant! He would violate a grave to satiate revenge! But surely you never permitted him to know your retreat?"

"No, nor does he know it. He sent that box anonymously directed to me, in the care of Bishop Whiting, who, ignorant of its ghastly contents, forwarded it to me."

"What a monster that man was!"

"Oh, let us say no more of him! My next shock, dear Mrs. Somers, was just after coming home to my husband's house, and taking up a daguerrotype from the parlor table, and while looking at the pictured face of a rather handsome man. I inquired of the servant in attendance whose it was. Oh, Mrs. Somers, whom do you suppose she told me?"

"I could never even conjecture, my dear girl."

"It was the likeness of my husband's stepfather—Gustave Perlemonte!"

"What!"

"My husband's stepfather—Gustave Perlemonte."

"Oh, Erma! Erma! What a climax to your calamity!"

"Now you see how out of all possibility is the question of my ever revealing my past history to him of all living men!"

"I see! I see! But, oh, Erma, how unutterably calamitous that you should have married him, of all men! Married him, too, with this dreadful secret, infinitely more dreadful in what you have just told me! Oh, Erma! Why, why did you do it?"

"Because I loved him! Because to live with him was life! To part with him was death! Because I would rather live with him in misery, peril and fear than part

with him in utter cold and deathly despair! Wretched as I am, I am with him! I am with him!" she breathed, in low, impassioned tones.

"But oh, Erma! The concealment, the deception practiced upon the man you love!"

Erma's face crimsoned.

"There is no deception," she said.

"'No deception'!" echoed the lady.

"Not any; no, not any concealment that is not agreed upon between us."

"Explain yourself, dear Erma."

"I told my lover, before he became my husband, that I had resolved never to marry; and so I had, dear friend, but that resolution was formed before I knew the power of love. I told him that I had a secret—a something in my life that should forever forbid marriage. He demanded, with a covert insolence and ferocity that only his strong emotion could excuse, what my secret was—whether I had ever loved."

"Ah! the first thought that would naturally come into a man's mind."

"I did not then understand the full meaning of his question, but was able to assure him that, with the exception of family affections and Christian charity, I had never loved at all, either wisely or unwisely, until I met my fate in him. When he became assured of this truth, and also of the other truth that the 'something' in my life which would not bear the light was something not my own creation, something for which I was in no degree responsible, then he made light of my burden. He persisted in his suit, and insisted that we should be married, vowing that I should keep my secret unquestioned to the end of my life."

"He was more confiding, not to say magnanimous, than most men."

"He loved me even as I loved him. Being assured that I was irresponsible, blameless in all these dire misfortunes, of whose very nature he was to remain ignorant, he took me to his heart, even as I, with this terrible concealment, like Prometheus' vulture, preying on my life, went to him rather than that we should be parted forever! Oh, is there anything so painful to those who love

each other as being parted forever? Is not any trouble easier to bear together than the bitter sorrow of separation?"

"Well, then, Erma, since your husband knew the existence of this concealment from your own lips, and knowing it, consented to let it remain unquestioned, I do not see why you should 'live in the midst of alarms,' as you say. If there should be a discovery, you have only to remind him that that was the secret he consented you should keep."

"Ah! but, Mrs. Somers, he cannot guess how hideous the thing is which concealment veils. If he could—if he could—do you think he could bear to look upon my face again?"

The lady shuddered.

"Even you fear that he could not," exclaimed Erma.

"Which makes me wonder still why, with such a secret on your conscience, with such thoughts in your mind, you ever ventured to marry," said Mrs. Somers.

"Because I loved him so—I loved him so!" cried Erma, wringing her hands. "I would rather live with him, in this constant terror, than not live with him at all! I told you so!

"And you will live in constant terror, poor child, unless you have the courage to risk all and tell your husband. Why, even at the sight of me, your old friend, you nearly fainted."

"Because you knew all, and by an incautious word might have revealed all."

"Which I might have done most innocently, not knowing but that the people here knew who you are, my dear, and all about you. But now, Erma, being forewarned, I shall be as cautious as you could wish me to be."

"Oh! I know, I know that you will be. And oh, my dear Mrs. Somers, let me beg of you, for the love of——"

Erma's words were cut short by the bustling entrance of Mrs. Blantyre, blooming with health and beauty, and radiant in a sky-blue organdie dress, garnished with Valenciennes lace and blush-roses.

"Oh! my dear, good-morning. So glad you came early! What a delightful morning for your drive! The children will be enhanced to see you. Oh, I beg pardon!"

said the host, turning from the guest whom she had greeted with so much effusion to the matronly lady who had withdrawn a trifle from the meeting, by simply reclining back in her chair and looking out of the window. "Mrs. Somers, this is my young friend and neighbor, Mrs. Rodolph Wolfsohn, formerly Miss Erma Wildering, and your predecessor. Mrs. Wolfsohn, my dear, this lady is Mrs. Sophie Somers, your successor in the charge of my troublesome boy and girl," added Mrs. Blantyre, with a good-humored laugh.

"Oh! we have already made each other's acquaintance," laughed the stout lady in return. "You did not expect two strange women to meet in your drawing room and be left alone together for half an hour without becoming quite familiar with each other, did you?"

"Well, no, hardly. Has it been as long as that, dear Erma? How remiss I have been! And where is Mr. Wolfsohn?"

"Gone down to the stables with Captain Blantyre to look at a horse," replied Erma, smiling.

"Oh, yes! these men! There is always a horse or a hound to be looked at! Well, Erma, my dear, come with me and get rid of your bonnet and mantle. You will excuse us, Mrs. Somers?"

"Certainly."

And Mrs. Blantyre led Erma off to a "parlor chamber" on the same floor, where all the accessories of the toilet awaited her.

"How do you like our new governess?" inquired the lady, while Erma was smoothing her hair.

"Very much, indeed," truthfully replied the latter.

"Fancy our being resolved to engage a lady of mature age, of discreet years, so that we should run no risk of losing her, as we lost you, by marriage, and then—finding a charming, gushing, bland widow of thirty-eight summers, and no winters at all, so to speak! Why, Erma, she will marry herself off even sooner than you did!"

"If there were anyone to marry herself to. But there is not, you know," said the younger lady.

"Oh, yes, there is. There is Uncle Clement Gladden, for one."

"Oh, Mrs. Blantyre! Don't be profane!"

"Well, then, there is Dr. Dutton."

"A settled old bachelor, is he not?"

"Yes, but trust a handsome widow to unsettle him! And then there is Cousin Wally Lambe."

"Miss Barbara Gunn's meek dependent. I hardly think him a desirable *parti*."

"Hardly. The choice lies between Mr. Gladden and Dr. Dutton, and trust that handsome Mrs. Somers for bringing down either she may choose to aim at."

An irruption of the children interrupted the conversation.

Fleurie, Eustace and little Fance, all threw themselves *en masse* upon Erma.

Fleurie and Eustace were in their pretty home dresses, but Fance had on her little white, chip hat, trimmed with light-blue ribbons, and her white Swiss muslin cape, trimmed with Valenciennes lace, in addition to her usual dress.

"Why, Fance, my darling, how do you do?" cried Mrs. Blantyre, snatching the little one up to her own heart, while Eustace and Fleurie besieged Erma.

"Daddy's come! Daddy rided me over on the horse before him," answered the child, returning her mother's caresses.

"Does Fance really remain with Mr. Gladden?" inquired Erma, incredulously.

"Really and truly she does," answered the lady.

"How can you bear to part with her?"

"Oh, I can better bear to part with her than to break her heart. And it would break her heart to take her from her 'daddy,'" laughed the lady.

"And break his, too, almost," added Erma.

"Where is Miss Mesh, Fance? Did she come?" asked Mrs. Blantyre.

"Yes, she rided over in the gig, and Quil drived her, and she's in the parlor now 'long of a great, big lady."

"Oh! Flurry, dear, won't you go and ask Miss Mesh to come in here and take off her bonnet?"

"Yes, mamma," replied the young lady, as she vanished from the room.

Miss Mesh soon entered, ushered in by Fleurie.

She still looked and moved more like an exhumed and resuscitated corpse, if such a thing could be, than like a normal living woman. She had not yet fully recovered from the effects of her low fever, and probably would not do so for months, if ever.

If Miss Mesh had not vitality enough to be vicious her life was at a low ebb, indeed.

She saluted the two ladies in a languid manner, as she laid off her bonnet, and expressed a hope that, as they were both now respectably married, they would try and mend their ways.

Susan Blantyre and Erma both smiled, and promised. They considered poor Ada Mesh half crazy since her illness, and they humored her accordingly.

As soon as Miss Mesh had declared herself ready, the whole party went into the drawing room, where they were soon joined by the three gentlemen, Mr. Gladden, Mr. Wolfsohn and Capt. Blantyre, who had been walking and smoking together on the lawn, and who, on catching sight of the ladies, threw away the stumps of their cigars and came into the house.

The conversation turned upon the news from Mexico, and Gen. Taylor's movements on the Rio Grande.

"He has made a demand for five thousand more troops. Upon my life, Wolfsohn, two able-bodied young men like you and me ought not to be idling here at home with such a war on foot!" exclaimed Capt. Blantyre.

Rodolph laughed.

"If this had chanced a year ago I should have been there," he said.

"No doubt of it. And so should I. But you see we are neither of us our own men, Wolfsohn," laughed Capt. Blantyre.

"Yet there are many brave men in the field who have left mothers, wives and children at home," added Rodolph, gravely.

This conversation was carried on lightly enough, and it made no impression on the elastic spirits of Susan Blantyre, but it sank like lead on the heavy heart of Erma Wolfsohn. Something whispered to her that this subject, commenced in laughing jest, would end in weeping earnest.

The announcement of dinner made a diversion.

After dinner the whole party strolled out on the lawn, and sat under the shade of the trees, or sauntered through the garden gathering choice flowers, or went down to "the quarters" to see and talk to the colored people in their own little log huts.

It was a free and easy, lazy day.

At seven o'clock they had tea, and then, as there were signs of a thunder storm rising, the carriages and horses were ordered, and the guests took leave and departed for their several homes.

This was Saturday. Mrs. Somers had arrived only the evening before, and her duties were to commence on Monday.

Rodolph and Erma reached home just before dark, and only a few moments before the threatened storm burst.

They found old Minty standing outside of the door waiting for them.

"You should not expose yourself to the night air at this season of the year, aunty; you will get chills," said Erma, in a low voice, as Mr. Wolfsohn and his servant drove around to the stables, and she entered the house with her woman.

"You see, honey, dere's a storm comin' up, don't you?"

"Yes, aunty, and so much the more reason why you should stay in the house," said the young lady, as she entered the parlor and began to lay off her hat and mantle.

"Yes, mist'ess; but listen, my dear young mist'ess, I's feared to stay by myself when dere's a storm comin' up."

"Are you afraid of thunder and lightning?"

"Oh, no, my dear mist'ess; I ain't feared ob nothing dat de good Lord sends, like thunder an' lightning."

"What, then?" inquired her mistress.

"De speckter, ma'am," answered the woman, in a hushed, mysterious tone.

"'The Specter'!"

"Yes, mist'ess; him what always 'pears in de hardest ob de storm."

"Surely you are dreaming, aunty."

"Oh, no, my mist'ess. I ain't! I wish I was! I can't be dreaming, mist'ess, while I's standing here talking to you."

"You say you—— What do you mean by the specter, then?"

"Mist'ess," meekly replied the woman, "I mean that awful, black figure what always goes dancing about on de tops ob de houses here in every storm."

"Have you seen it?"

"Yes, mist'ess."

"Have you ever told your master about it?"

"Yes, mist'ess."

"What does he say?"

"Laughs at me, mist'ess."

"Certainly. So you see it is only your imagination, Aunt Minty."

"No, mist'ess. I beg your pardon, mist'ess, for contradicting you, but no 'magination could 'maginate that."

A blinding flash of lightning, followed by a deafening peal of thunder, shocked both mistress and servant into silence.

When both had in some degree recovered their senses, Aunt Minty took hold of her lady's skirts, and whispered:

"Come upstairs, mist'ess! Come upstairs in de garret and look out'n de norf window and 'haps you'll see it."

Rather from complacency than any curiosity, Erma followed the woman, who, carrying a tallow candle, preceded her up two pairs of stairs to the bare garret.

Another dazzling flash of lightning and deafening crash of thunder was followed by a deluge of rain.

"Come to the front window, mist'ess, and look out," said the woman.

The bare dormer window had neither shutter nor shade to obscure the view. Erma looked forth.

Flash after flash of lightning, peal after peal of thunder, accompanied by floods of pouring rain, followed each other in such a rapid succession as to blind, deafen and confound the senses of Erma to such a degree that she could, at first, see nothing.

After a few moments, however, she was startled and amazed on beholding a dark form of gigantic proportions standing on the top of the barn, which was nearly opposite the window, though at a considerable distance from it, being beyond the lawn, and on the edge of a field.

A sudden blaze of lightning had revealed this figure,

and then, with all the landscape, it was swallowed up in darkness, while the rain still fell in floods.

"Did you see it, mist'ess?" inquired old Minty, creeping to the lady's side, and whispering the question.

"I did," replied Erma.

"What is it, mist'ess?"

"I don't know."

"Is it a real specter, do you think?"

"Nonsense, aunty."

"Mist'ess, is it a good or a bad sperrit? Only tell me that."

"It can be neither, of course."

"Then, what can it be, mist'ess?"

"I do not know."

"Oh, my goodness alive! Look a' there, mist'ess!"

Erma had already seen. A blaze of lightning had revealed the whole landscape more plainly than the sun at noonday, and in the midst of it the gigantic, black figure on the roof of the barn, leaping, tumbling and dancing like a monstrous gorilla, or a frenzied acrobat.

The next instant all the scene was again engulfed in the blackness of darkness.

Erma shuddered in spite of herself.

Not for a moment, however, did she consider this figure a supernatural apparition; yet its superhuman height and performances amazed and confounded her.

"Has anyone besides yourself seen this form?" she inquired of old Minty.

"Yes, mist'ess; all de cullered people has seen it, and dey calls it de 'Thunder Devil,' 'cause it allers 'pears in de storm."

"Has your master ever seen it?"

"No, mist'ess; and dat's de reason why he won't believe nuffin' 'tall 'bout it."

"I will go and bring him up here now. He must have come in, and he shall see this form, and then, perhaps, he will be able to unravel the mystery and expose the fraud."

"Oh, my dear mist'ess, please let me go! I's afeared to stay up here by myself looking at dat."

"Very well, then, Minty, take the candle and go. I will stay here."

"Ain't you feared, mist'ess? Hadn't you better come along, too?"

"No, I am not afraid. I would rather stay here and enjoy the specter of the 'Storm Fiend.'"

Minty hurried downstairs with the candle in her hand.

Erma placed herself at the bare window, where every flash of lightning revealed to her the antic, spectral form capering and dancing on the roof of the barn.

In about ten minutes Mr. Wolfsohn's steps were heard ascending to the attic.

"What is this wild story that old Minty tells me, dear?" he inquired, as he entered the room.

"Come and place yourself at the window here, Rodolph, and your eyes will answer you better than ours can," said Erma, as she made room for him.

He came and stood by her side.

Old Minty cowered behind them.

"Watch, now, for a flash of lightning, and look toward the roof of the barn," said Erma.

At that instant, also, a broad and blinding blaze shone from horizon to horizon, lighting up all the landscape.

"Well?" inquired Mr. Wolfsohn, as soon as all was dark again.

"Well!" responded Erma.

"I did not see anything!" said Mr. Wolfsohn.

"Neither did I this time; but wait for the next flash," replied Erma.

They both gazed out into the darkness to be ready for the next revelation.

The lightning blazed abroad over heaven and earth, but revealed no antic demon dancing on the barn.

"It is very strange," said Erma, "for both Minty and myself saw it there every time it lightened until you came up."

Rodolph replied by a peal of good-humored laughter.

"You are incredulous, I perceive," said Erma, with a mortified air; "but wait. The next flash of lightning may show it."

"Very well. I will give the 'Storm Fiend' a fair trial," replied Rodolph, with enforced gravity, as he once more flattened his face against the window panes.

But though they watched diligently for some time

longer, and endured more than a score of dazzling flashes of lightning, they saw no more of the "Thunder Devil."

"Come, come, my dear Erma; it is of no use to stand here and risk being struck blind while looking for what has no existence except in imagination. Let us go down," said Mr. Wolfsohn, losing patience at last.

"As sure as I live, I saw that strange antic figure leaping and dancing on the roof of the barn in the midst of thunder, lightning and rain! I saw it at least a dozen times!" persisted Erma, in a tone of vexation, as she turned from the window.

"In your 'mind's eye,' my dearest, doubtless. The truth is, Erma, that old Minty's hair-raising stories of this imaginary specter have so impressed your mind as to subject you to the not uncommon disorder of hallucination or optical illusion. Minty," he added, suddenly turning to the old woman, "listen to me. I desire to hear no more of this hobgoblin, do you understand?"

"Yes, marster, I do; which we all likewise desires neither to hear no more of it, nor yet to see no more of it, if it could be helped."

"And you will obey me?"

"Yes, my marster, I'll 'bey you, which I hopes the black hobgob' will likewise," meekly replied Minty.

They all went downstairs, and, as the storm was now well over, and the hour was late, the household retired to rest.

And after that, for several weeks, no more was heard or seen of the "Storm Fiend."

CHAPTER XVI.

OFF TO WAR.

He, like the charger in the stall
That hears without the trumpet's call,
Began to chafe and swear;
A sorry thing to hide my head
In dwelling like a fearful maid
When such a war is near.—Sir Walter Scott.

Erma's "prophetic heart" had not missed her.

The merry jests about going off to the war, bandied between Capt. Blantyre and Rodolph Wolfsohn, became grave earnest.

Early in July, perhaps inspired by the associations of the "glorious Fourth," Capt. Blantyre began to get up a company of volunteers for the Mexican War.

Rodolph Wolfsohn, with all a young man's patriotic enthusiasm, military ardor and love of adventure, was soon drawn into the enterprise.

They were but the subjects of a widespread martial epidemic. The country had not "enjoyed" a war since the close of that of 1812-15.

The young men of the nation at that time had never seen one in all their lives. That seemed then a matter of history—an affair of the past. So when war was actually declared by Mexico against the United States, Young America, as soon as she could take in the astounding fact, was seized with a passion for military glory that spread faster than Asiatic cholera.

We have had a plenty of war since that, Heaven knows —war enough to satisfy the most bloodthirsty of the battle-ax heroes; but in 1846 we had basked in more than thirty years of peace since 1815—except, indeed, for a few troubles with the Florida or frontier Indians.

None took the war fever worse than the young men of the South. But, indeed, all fevers run high in that climate.

Capt. Blantyre was no longer youthful; but then we know that all juvenile maladies, such as measles, military ardor and the like, go much worse with the mature victims whom they may happen to seize.

Capt. Blantyre took the military fever in the natural way, and gave it to Rodolph Wolfsohn and many others in his neighborhood, whose systems were prepared to receive it.

The result was that before the first of August a company of one hundred volunteers was formed to go to the Rio Grande, of whom Russell Blantyre was elected captain, and Rodolph Wolfsohn first lieutenant.

And thenceforth nothing of any account was seen or heard in Ice Cliff but drilling and training, drumming and fifing, marching and countermarching, day after day, for some weeks before they considered themselves ready to go to Washington to offer their services to the President.

The time of departure was fixed for the first of September.

Not until the day was actually settled did the two newly made wives begin to believe that these warlike preparations meant anything more than parades and processions.

Certainly, they had objected to the measure from the very first—objected even to hearing talk of it, while still believing that it was only talk.

Now they raised their voices in earnest protestation.

And now, therefore, they were called upon to hear much said about the "Roman matron" and the "Spartan mother"—bloody-minded Amazons, who would arm their husbands and their sons for the battle and bid them come back bearing their shields, or on them.

"My dear," said Susan Blantyre, one day late in August, when she had come over to compare notes and grievances with Erma Wolfsohn at Darkwood, while both their husbands were with the company at Ice Cliff, "if there is anything I hate to hear of in this world, it is that historical Spartan woman whom we are called upon to imitate! What have we got to do with her, I wonder? We live in the year of grace 1846. And there has been no war within our memory. The idea of there being a war at this advanced stage of civilization! Why, I should as soon have expected to hear of another Crusade, or of a Spanish Inquisition!"

Susan Blantyre was still a young woman. She had never known a war in her time. She believed, as many a woman did then, that "wars and rumors of wars" had finally gone out forever with the close of the French Revolution and the American Revolution with its "afterpiece" of 1812-15. So the breaking out of the war of 1846, after a thirty years' peace, was a profund astonishment to her, as if time had turned on its course and was taking us back to the midst of the middle ages.

Susan Blantyre has lived to see since that, war, and the terrible engines of war, growing more sanguinary and destructive every year, until in comparison with the horrors of later years the Mexican War has dwindled into the aspect of merest child's play.

Yet it was a glorious strike in its day, and developed magnanimous heroism.

Erma had implored her husband not to go; but she, too, had been told of the "Spartan woman," until she was ashamed to continue her plea.

She changed it for another, and entreated her husband to take her with him, "even to the battlefield," urging that any hardship would be easier for her to bear than the agony of parting; but to this second plea he was even more obdurate than to the first. If compelled to one of the two alternatives, he said, he would much rather give up the whole adventure and remain at home an object of self-contempt, than to go and take his wife with him, and expose her to all the hardships, privations and perils incident to the condition of a soldier's wife at the seat of war.

"Oh! why will they leave us, Susan Blantyre? How can they bear to leave us, so soon after our marriage, too?" tearfully inquired Erma, in the course of that same day on which her friend came to see her.

"Because they are men, my dear," answered the captain's lady. "Because they are men.

"'Man's love is of man's life, a thing apart.'

You know the rest."

"And I don't believe it. Love is life—the greatest good in heaven or on earth. Oh! Susan, this will break my heart!"

"No, it will not, dear. Hearts are so uncommonly strong to suffer and hard to break. I don't say but that it will be grievous enough for both of us, and even worse for you than for me, because you will be so lonely here; but we can bear it, dear, and as for you, why, you must spend a great deal of your time with me," said Mrs. Blantyre, cheerfully.

"Only ten days more, Susan, and they will be gone."

"Oh, well! I don't believe they will stay long. This war will not last, you must know. I dare say before they reach the frontier, peace will have been proclaimed. The war cannot be permitted to last in this advanced age of civilization," insisted the captain's wife, still under the delusion, caused by the long peace, that Christian nations had outlived their age of barbarism—a delusion to be rudely dispelled by the horrors of succeeding years.

Susan Blantyre prepared to take her leave.

"We are to dine at The Marsh to-morrow," said Erma. "It will be the first occasion of our doing so. We have been frequently invited, but something has always intervened to prevent our accepting the invitation. I hope you are to meet us there."

"Oh, yes! By the way, how do you like Miss Barbara Gunn?"

"I have never seen her," answered Erma; "her rheumatism has always been her excuse for not coming here."

"It is a true plea; but what can she expect, living in The Marsh? I hope nothing will prevent our meeting at her house to-morrow, Erma."

"I hope so, too."

"You tell me you have never seen Miss Barbara Gunn; well, Erma, I hope you will be pleased with her when you do see her. She is the most powerful woman I ever saw or heard of in my life."

"I have been told she is a remarkably tall, robust woman, with a very strong will and a very high temper."

"Oh, my dear Erma, that doesn't begin to describe her! There isn't her like in this country, if there is in this world. I confess that I stand in terror of her."

"I never heard that she was wicked," said Erma.

"No, but she is so frightfully formidable."

"My dear, she is sixty years of age," said Erma, deprecatingly.

"And—notwithstanding her occasional rheumatism—she is stronger than any woman, yes, or any man, either, of thirty! She is six feet high, and is broad-shouldered and strong-limbed, stout and muscular in proportion. She has a large face with masculine features, which really ought to have a long, silver-gray beard to soften them; but they have not, of course, and so they are left to their severe hardness. To look at her, you would suppose that she was a very powerful, rude, old soldier or sea captain, masquerading for some purpose in a woman's dress."

"She cannot help being tall and coarse-looking; and I have heard that she has many noble qualities," said Erma, apologetically; "courage, generosity, magnanimity——"

"My dear, she has every masculine virtue under the

sun, including strength of will, violence of temper and profanity of language!"

"'Profanity of language'!" echoed Erma, in "holy horror."

"Why, yes; of course. Did you never hear that of Miss Barbara Gunn?"

"Never!"

"My dear, she swears like a swashbuckler on a raid, or a pirate in a storm."

"It is shocking!" said Erma.

"Not that I ever heard her, you know. She never indulges in strong language in the presence of ladies and gentlemen. But in her family and on the plantation! Whee-ew! the tales Flurry and Rooster told when they came home from their visit to her house. Of course I rated the children soundly for tale-bearing; but, then, I had heard the same thing from so many other quarters ever since I first came to live in this neighborhood. Miss Barbara Gunn's despotic will, violent temper and profane swearing are matters of common notoriety."

"But, my dear Susan, how can this be? Miss Gunn is one of the strongest pillars of St. James' Church. She is a member in full communion."

"Yes, I know she is. And the rector has been interviewed on the subject more than once. He has been told, to his face, by some disaffected members of his congregation, that any poor man or woman would have been excommunicated long ago for such profanity; but that Miss Gunn, being a wealthy woman, and a liberal contributor to the church charities, escaped with impunity."

"Well, and what had the good Dr. Cleveland to say to that?"

"What could he say? Miss Barbara converts herself regularly once a month, and sincerely, for the time being, no doubt. He could not question the reality of such conversion, but had to leave the matter where it ought to rest—between her Lord and her own conscience."

"I suppose there is more of eccentricity than evil in Miss Gunn's nature."

"A great deal more! Well, my dear, I must go. There is a cloud coming up. I shall have to hurry, or be caught

in the rain. Good-by, dear Erma. I am glad to leave you in somewhat better spirits than I found you."

And the friends embraced and parted.

The sun went down behind a bank of clouds, and the night set in dark and starless, with a soft, drizzling rain.

After having seen that the table was set and a substantial supper prepared, Erma went down into the parlor to await the return of her husband from Ice Cliff.

She sat by the front window, praying for strength to bear the impending separation.

There was no light in the room—it was kept dark on account of the mosquitoes.

In an hour after sunset the full moon arose, struggling with the thinning and breaking clouds, and sometimes visible and sometimes veiled, but always rendering the features of the night view more distinct than they had been before.

Erma looked out, and, to her surprise, she saw a number of men and women, their heads protected from the rain by broad-brimmed hats, approaching the house from the banks of Low River.

She arose and rang the bell. That brought Aunt Minty to the room.

"Who are those people, Minty?" she inquired, pointing from the window.

"Yes, mist'ess," replied the meek creature, in a subdued tone. "It is all right, my mist'ess. Dem people is some ob de Ebenezer Methody Church, which I 'longs to, honey."

"What do they want here?"

"I's gwine to testify, mist'ess."

"To testify?"

"Yes, mist'ess; to testify—to 'splain, I mean."

"Oh! to explain?"

"Yes, mist'ess."

"Go on, then; they have all gone around toward the back of the house," said Erma, glancing from the window before she settled herself in her chair to listen to Minty's explanation.

"Well, you see, mist'ess——"

"Sit down, Aunt Minty: don't stand."

"Thanky, mist'ess, I will. Well, mist'ess. you know

that stormy night when you an' me seed de Thunder Devil dancin' on de roof ob de barn?"

"Ceratinly."

"Well, mist'ess, next Sunday ebening, when I went to class-meetin' after church, which Brudder Jehial, Miss Barbara Gunn's coachman, is my class leader, I made mention ob dis Thunder Devil what tries my faith so much, an' de whole class agreed to come out de fust stormy night an' watch for it, an' try to pray it away offen de face of de yeth; an' dis is de fust rainy night what has come, mist'ess, an' here dey is. Septimus, he will take 'em to de best place."

"We will go up to the attic and see what comes of it, Minty," said Mr. Wolfsohn.

They went up cautiously in the dark, and were soon watching from the attic window.

They saw the slope of the park with its large trees, the great barn at the bottom, and the field beyond.

Near the foot of the lawn they saw the group of negroes standing in the drizzling rain, gazing eagerly up to the top of the barn.

Suddenly, as from the clouds above, the "Thunder Devil" leaped upon the roof and began his diabolical dance.

At which Brother Jehial's class, with a simultaneous roar of terror, incontinently turned and fled, leaving the field to the fiend.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MARSH AND ITS MISTRESS.

Oh! when she's angry, she is keen and shrewd.
—SHAKESPEARE.

Low River, it must be remembered, ran north and south through that beautiful, undulating country of wooded hills and vales that has already been described.

Brighthome, Blantyre House and Darkwood lay on the western side.

Brighthome was farthest up the stream and back on the highest range of hills.

Blantyre House was lower down in a wooded vale.

Darkwood was quite down on the shore.

About a mile below Darkwood, an old, half-ruined bridge, a quarter of a mile in length, crossed the river and the marshes that bordered both sides at this point.

It was called Lambe's Bridge, and it had a very pathetic history.

About twenty-five years before this date a young farmer named Walter Lambe, prosperous in his circumstances and full of ambition and public spirit, had got the authority of the proper parties and had built this bridge, at his own expense, hoping at the same time to supply a great public want and to make his own fortune.

But the undertaking was a stupendous one for a young man of poor Walter Lambe's moderate resources, and he could get no one to go into the enterprise with him.

So in the course of its construction he spent every dollar of his ready money, and then mortgaged his house and farm to finish his bridge.

When it was at length completed, with a toll-taker in a small cottage at the western extremity, and a moderate tariff of from a penny for a single passenger up to a quarter for a carriage and pair, Walter Lambe sat down and waited for wealth to flow into his coffers, wherewith first to pay off the mortgage on his estate and afterward to live in luxury.

But wealth never came.

Ruin did.

After the novelty of the bridge was over, the country people mostly preferred to cross the river at the ford a mile above, or at the ferry a mile below, and go a little out of their way, rather than pay a small toll to cross the bridge.

The bridge never paid for itself. The money taken from the few passengers barely sufficed to pay the toll-taker and to keep the bridge in such repair as the terms of the license to build it required for safety.

For years and years Walter Lambe struggled on, paying the interest on the mortgages as well as he could, and staving off the day of judgment as long as possible.

But it came at last.

Lambe's farm, with his house, barn, stock and everything, was sold by the sheriff, and the public-spirited bridge builder was left without a home or a dollar.

Then this distant cousin, Miss Barbra Gunn, had invited him to come and stay at her house until he could turn around and do better.

Poor Cousin Wally! He had never been able to "turn 'round" or "do better," but had lived on at The Marsh, an unpaid overseer of the negroes, while still the toll-taker at the west end of the bridge took in scarcely money enough to keep himself from starving and the old bridge from falling to pieces.

At the east end of the bridge a raised road, a sort of continuation of the bridge, in fact, led through the quagmire and up the plains toward the hills beyond.

About a quarter of a mile up this road a lane opened on the left hand that led straight to The Marsh, situated in the midst of a low, green plain, surrounded immediately by fields and orchards, and bounded on the east, north and south by a thick wood that inclosed it in a semicircle, or rather a horseshoe form, and bounded on the west by the quagmire and the river.

The farm buildings consisted of many barns and stables, and two dwelling houses called the old and the new house, facing each other in the quaintest manner, and having a plank pathway passing from one to the other.

The old historical house was a substantial stone cottage with a steep overhanging roof and tall chimneys.

The new house, built by Miss Barbra herself, was a modern, square, two-story building, convenient, but by no means picturesque.

Both these buildings were shaded by clustering acacia trees. Both were occupied—the old house as common sitting rooms and sleeping rooms for the family, and the new house as drawing room, parlor and guest chambers. This last was only opened for company.

On the east of the dwelling houses was the fine old garden.

Here lived Miss Barbra Gunn, with her old dependent cousin, Mr. Wally Lambe, and her three motherless nieces, the Misses Bibb, daughters of her widowed brother-in-law, Gen. Curiatio Bibb, of The Hill, a gallant old veteran of the War of 1812.

Gen. Bibb had named his first three children, all girls, Rose, Lily and Violet, because these names of flowers

represented the three national colors of red, white and blue; but Violet being too fragile for the earth, was soon transplanted to the gardens of Paradise.

The fourth child, also a girl, born two years after the departure of Violet, could have been named for the little angel sister and the third color, but that the mother was superstitious on the subject, and strongly objected to the proposed measure.

So they had that unoffending infant baptized and registered under the name of Barbra Gunn, in honor of the formidable amazon of The Marsh, who vouchsafed to stand godmother to the little victim. And it was Barbra, mind you, and not Barbara, for Miss Gunn had dropped the second "a" out of her own Christian name, asking what in the Dee was the use of a letter which was never heard, saying that it was as worthless as a lazy man, or a barren fruit tree. She would also have informally dropped the second "n," an equally silent letter, out of her surname, but her man of business warned her that to do so without legislative authority might involve legal complications in future rights of property.

Whether she were right or wrong, Miss Gunn would run no such risks, and she continued to write her surname as her fathers had done before her.

When the little Barbra was but one year old, and her elder sisters were respectively five and seven, their delicate mother passed away, leaving her little girl to the care of their aunt, her maiden sister, Miss Gunn, of The Marsh.

The broken-hearted widower had consented that the children should be taken to the house where they would receive more care than he was able to bestow upon them.

They had lived at The Marsh ever since.

In the course of time their father, Gen. Bibb, recovered from his heavy affliction in the loss of his wife, though he never took a second one, but lived on alone among his servants on The Hill, cared for by his capable housekeeper, Olive, a gentle and comely quadroon woman, who had been the confidential attendant of his late wife.

Gen. Bibb made his daughters a very liberal allowance, and entertained them, their aunt, and their friends very frequently at his house on The Hill; and, indeed,

there were very few houses more agreeable or popular than that of Gen. Curiatio, under the administration of his good housekeeper, Olive.

At the time of which we now write the three sisters were grown up to womanhood, or nearly so. Rose was nineteen, Lily seventeen, and Barbra thirteen years of age.

They were known to intimate friends as Ro, Lil and Bab.

They were very much alike; so much so that any stranger seeing them together for the first time would know them to be sisters.

They were all very pretty brunettes, with plump forms, very dark skins, fine suits of glossy black hair, large, soft, dark eyes, little straight noses, full red lips, and round chins.

The eldest two were amiable, placid, easy-going girls who never gave their aunt or anybody else the least trouble, and who might be depended on, indeed, to marry strictly in accordance with the counsel of prudent friends, and afterward to make excellent wives, mothers and housekeepers.

But Barbra, or Bab, as she was called, was a vixen. How she came to be a vixen I do not know, unless it was because she had been brought up from her earliest infancy by her Aunt Gunn.

Everybody said that Bab was the very print of Miss Barbra, and would grow up to be just such a woman.

But they spoke recklessly, for it was scarcely possible that two such women could appear in the same place in the same century.

Midway between The Marsh and The Hill was The Dale, the home of Miss Barbra Gunn's only living sister, Mrs. Morset, an elderly and childless widow, who lived there with her late husband's two nieces, who were not sisters, but first cousins, and bore the same name; each was Miss Elizabeth Morset; but to distinguish them the elder was called Miss Betty, and the younger, Miss Beth. Both were getting on toward middle age.

Mrs. Morset was a very different person from her formidable spinster sister, Miss Barbra Gunn.

Mrs. Morset was a round-bodied, fat, indolent little

old lady, who loved her ease better than anything else in the world, and tolerated her late husband's nieces because they saved her a great deal of trouble in the management of her house and servants. She usually wore a black stuff home dress, and spent her days in sitting back in a flag-buttoned rocking-chair and knitting stockings for her household.

Miss Betty was a thin, dark-haired, gentle little old maid of thirty-five, who occupied her time chiefly in looking after the material welfare of the household.

Miss Beth was a delicate, fair-haired lady of some thirty or thirty-two years of age, who employed a part of her time in doing the fine sewing of the family, but the most of it in looking after their spiritual welfare.

Miss Beth was a devotee of the Episcopal Church, and if those had been the days of Protestant nunneries, Miss Beth might have been a Protestant nun.

She was now the "right hand" of the rector, Dr. Cleveland.

People wondered why the bachelor, Dr. Cleveland, did not marry Miss Beth; but, alas! it was the case with Miss B. as it has been with many another holy woman. She loved a good-for-nothing, ne'er-do-well, tipsy, rollicking cousin, who had taken himself off to parts unknown and had never been heard of since.

Not that Miss Beth would have married that scamp, unless he had reformed. She had told him so, and he, poor wretch, had made several futile attempts at reformation, but had always failed, and at last, as I said, he had taken himself off in self-despair.

Miss Beth had sorrowed without hope for several years, and had devoted herself to the church and its active charities, to the great satisfaction of the bachelor rector, who thought what a pattern helpmate she would be to an overtasked minister.

As for the plump and comfortable old Aunt Morset, she had never had a moment's peace of mind, while "that scamp of Beth's" was her guest. She was always dreading lest he should in some way demoralize her household, or "turn the heads of the colored girls with his nonsensical talk," as she called it.

If for a few moments Jerry Lambe was absent from

the room, she would ring her little handbell and bring in her servant, when something like this conversation would ensue:

"Jim, whey is Ruth?"

"Gone to de spring, 'm."

"Whey's your Marse Jerry Lambe?"

"Dunno, 'm."

"Go after Ruth this minute, and tell her to come right in here to me, and never mind the pail of water."

These scenes would occur perhaps a dozen times a day while the scamp was in the neighborhood.

Aunt Morset seemed to think "eternal vigilance" was the only price of "safety."

But now the poor scamp had long disappeared from his native land, and Aunt Morset dozed in peace, but for an occasional grunt over the disappointed hopes of the rector and the neglected opportunities of her younger niece.

"Beth Morset is such a fool," she confided to her sister, Miss Barbra Gunn—"such a fool! Here she knows that I have nothing to leave her! All I possess goes, after my death, where it ought to go—to Milly Bibb's child'en, and she will have nothing to depend upon. Now, here's a good chance of settling herself respectably and she won't do it—no, she won't! Beth is such a fool!"

"It is you who are the fool, Sister Morset! Why in the —— don't you make the woman marry the rector if he wants her? The idea of consulting her about it."

Aunt Morset grunted and hinted that she had no power to make girls marry against their wills.

"I'd do it," said Miss Gunn, with a threatening snort. But gentle, indolent Mrs. Morset could only sigh and grumble.

Affairs were in this state at the time of which we write.

Now one word of explanation in regard to these three adjoining plantations, The Hill, The Dale, and The Marsh.

They had all three once formed one vast estate that had been in the possession of the great Gunn family—if not from time immemorial, at least from the earliest settlement of the country.

When the last great Gunn went off he had left no son,

but three daughters, among whom he divided his immense manor, but not equally by any means.

To his eldest daughter, Barbra, who was his favorite, and who had never married, but had lived with him always, who was like him in person and in disposition, and whom he declared to be "every inch a Gunn," he bequeathed the lion's share, the largest half of his land, including The Marsh, upon which stood the old Gunn Manor House.

To his second daughter, Matilda, widow of Judge Morset, he left The Dale, upon which a pretty cottage stood.

And to his youngest daughter, Millicent, then married to Gen. Curiatio Bibb, he gave The Hill, where his son-in-law subsequently built a comfortable country house to replace the overseer's cottage.

At The Marsh, Miss Barbra Gunn had lived from her birth, and had continued to live since the death of her father—universally respected and—feared! And here her little nieces had lived with her from their infancy up.

Miss Gunn was not literally an aunt of Rodolph Wolfsohn. She was only a distant relative of his father and a neighbor of his mother; but he had been taught to call her aunt from his childhood up.

Miss Gunn had usurped much authority over him, as she did over all with whom she came in contact.

She had strongly disapproved of Rodolph's marriage —first, because the bride-elect was without fortune, and Miss Gunn swore, with several sounding oaths, that Rodolph Wolfsohn was poor enough himself, without "marrying poor." Secondly, because the girl was a salaried governess, no better than a hired servant, and no match for him. And thirdly, because Erma Wildering was a stranger, and, as Miss Gunn said, a foreigner, and she always suspected foreigners of being no better than adventurers and adventuresses.

But in the course of a few weeks Dr. Cleveland had talked the old lady over, and had shown her a letter from the bishop, who wrote in warm terms of the young lady who was about to marry and settle in the rector's parish. Then the good Dr. Cleveland assured Miss Gunn that the best thing which could happen to Mr. Rodolph Wolfsohn would be his marriage to so excellent a girl.

So Miss Gunn, who had a great respect for the clergy and their opinions, had withdrawn her opposition to the union.

And though neither she nor her young nieces had been present at the wedding, or had as yet called upon the young married pair, there was fair excuse, first in the inclemency of the weather, and afterward in the rheumatism of the old lady, for their failing to do so.

But Miss Gunn had on several occasions fixed a day and invited Mr. and Mrs. Wolfsohn to dinner.

Mr. and Mrs. Rodolph Wolsohn had always accepted these invitations, and Miss Barbra had always prepared a great feast.

But when the day came, from some unavoidable circumstance the young couple had always failed to keep their engagement, and Miss Gunn had gone off into a furious passion, denouncing all her fellow creatures as demons incarnate who were forever conspiring against her rights and her authority.

She swore like a swashbuckler, ordered her colored boys thrashed for the slightest offense, drove her colored girls trembling from her presence, whipped the cats and beat the dogs, and even commanded her poor, meek old cousin, Wally Lambe, to pack up and go, for she was not going to be trampled on by him any longer.

No great harm came of it all.

Cousin Wally never dreamed of such a thing as taking the fury at her word, or even that she would ever enforce her order. He knew that he was too useful to her as an unpaid overseer, and also he liked his home and his relations too well.

He only slipped away from her view, and took care to keep out of the range of the Gunn until the firing should be over.

This soon happened. It had raged too violently to last very long.

After these violent explosions of temper, Miss Gunn would be warned by a symptom which she called her heart beating in the back of her head, that she must cool down and deplete.

So she would sit herself down in her chip-bottomed chair in the middle of her bedroom—the ground floor of

the old house—send for a basin, a towel and her "white nigger," as everyone called him—poor Cousin Wally, with his lancet and "pullkins," was the general bleeder and tooth puller to the plantation—and she would bare her left arm up to the shoulder, have the vein opened, and have a pint of blood taken; then bind up her arm, pull down her sleeve, get up and declare that she felt "as light as a feather."

And her household silently thanked Heaven that the storm of battle was over for the time being; the great gun had gone off again and no one had been killed or wounded.

But as Miss Barbra gave way to these fits of unbridled fury every time disappointment crossed her path, she generally had a great load of sins to lay down every time she converted herself over again, as communion Sunday rolled around.

Then she did really repent, for the time, of her sins of temper, declaring most sincerely, in the words of the ritual, that "The remembrance of them was grievous, the burden of them was intolerable."

And no wonder.

Yet when the service was over and Miss Gunn was leaving the church, she would whisper to herself, or sometimes to Miss Beth Morset:

"But, after all, it was not so much my fault as theirs"—whoever they might be who had last enraged her. "I should never be angry except for people. And the denunciations, mind you, are on these occasions directed to those through whom offenses come, not to those, like me, to whom they come. Ah! I would not like to be in the place of some people. They will have much to answer for."

And now we have brought our account of Miss Barbra Gunn up to the last days of August, when she was making preparations on the very grandest scale for a farewell dinner to be given to the young officers about to depart for the seat of war, and to their families destined to be left behind.

And woe to them if they should fail to honor her hospitality on this last day of grace.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FAREWELL FESTIVITIES.

When shall we [all] meet again?
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?
When the hurly burly's done,
When the battle's lost or won. —SHAKESPEARE.

It was a glorious August day—this day of the reunion of friends and relatives.

Miss Barbra arose early to oversee, in person, the last arrangements in parlor and dining room.

And as she went about the house, driving her half-demented men and maids, her voice could be heard scolding, threatening and sometimes, alas! swearing.

She did not permit herself to go off into a passion that would require blood-letting, however, and when all was arranged to her satisfaction she retired with her maid, Minny, to dress for company.

In half an hour she emerged from her chamber, her very tall figure arrayed in an old-fashioned black satin gown, with a short waist and a long, clinging black skirt. Over her forehead she wore a false front of black hair, arranged in three puffs on each temple, and above that a high, full-crowned cap of white lace net, trimmed with white satin, and having long white satin flaring strings. Around her neck and shoulders she wore a folded white net handkerchief, fastened with a large mourning brooch set in gold, and containing three plaited strands of hair —the gray of her parents, the black of her sister Millicent, and the gold of her baby angel Violet. On her hands were black lace mittens.

People kept early hours at that time and in that neighborhood. A dinner party was not usually later than two o'clock.

Miss Gunn's guests began to arrive about eleven o'clock that day.

First came her sister, Mrs. Morset, and that comfortable little old lady's two nieces-in-law, the Misses Morset.

Mrs. Morset's short, barrel-like form was dressed exactly like her grenadier sister's; it was the general style of old ladies in that day.

The Misses Morset were dressed nearly alike—wearing thin, gray summer silks made quite plainly, and embroidered muslin collars and cuffs. The only difference being that the dark-complexioned Miss Betty, the elder, had her collar fastened with a pearl brooch, and her neck encircled by a gold chain, while the fair-haired Miss Beth wore no jewelry at all, but had her collar fastened with a plain white ribbon bow.

They had all taken off their bonnets in the parlor bedroom and had seated themselves with great formality in the parlor when Mrs. Morset looked around and inquired:

"Whey"—the plump little creature had a queer pronunciation of her own, and always said "whey" for where—"whey's Dr. Cleveland?"

"The rector has not arrived yet," answered Miss Barbra Gunn.

"But he's coming, ain't he?"

"Oh, yes. He promised. Besides, you know he would be sure to come, knowing Beth is here."

"Yes. Whey's the girls?"

"You mean Ro and the rest?"

"Yes."

"They'll be down in a moment."

"They ought to have been here to receive the first visitors. Girls ain't like what they used to be in our time. It is this here sending of them off to boarding-school and overedicating them. There's whey it is. That's what's the ruination of the girls. When I was young, girls was kept at home and taught to keep house and obey their elders, and so they did. Why, Lor', when my father told me I must marry Judge Morset, didn't I up and marry him, though he was sixty-five years old and cross-eyed? And didn't he die five years afterward at the age of seventy, and leave me a young widow without any children, and very well to do in the world? And haven't I been comfortable and independent ever since?" triumphantly inquired the old lady, as she leisurely fanned herself.

"Ay, truly; whereas if you had married to suit yourself—married that good-for-nothing Wally Lambe—where would you have been now? Still, you need not

have married at all. You might have lived single, as I have," said Miss Gunn, loftily.

"Yes; and being a younger sister, had to live here under your thumb, Barbra. No, I thank you. But whey's them girls? They ought to have been here to welcome us."

"And so they were; but they had all come down in white book muslin dresses and artificials in their hair, just as if they were all going off to a ball, and I sent them back flying with hornets in their ears, I tell you, to put on something more becoming."

"Well, what did I tell you? It is all the fruit of their being sent to boarding-school."

"Bab wasn't sent."

"No; she was too young when her sisters were sent, and even when they were taken away, and now I hope you won't send her at all."

"I don't mean to. I have another plan for Bab. I intend to ask Mrs. Blantyre to-day to receive Bab into her own domestic school, on trial, at least. Mrs. Blantyre's new governess is a widow of discreet years and much learning and accomplishments. So I have heard."

"Humph! I don't approve of so much edication for girls. I never had much, and I have got along just as well without it. And you never would have had any, only you were the oldest and was sent to school because our mother insisted on it; but mother didn't live until me and Milly were old enough to go. So after she died father wouldn't let any of his other children go to school—and right, too—only to put a passel of nonesense in their heads. Why, I have heerd tell that some of them lazy school-mist'esses actually teach the children that this here solid earth under our feet turns over and over every day of our lives! Now, did any soul alive ever hear such nonesense as that? It really makes my head swim to think of it, though I know it is all lies, for don't one's own common sense prove it?"

"The earth does turn over and over every day," said Miss Gunn, speaking with the authority of truth.

"Now, Barbra Gunn, I am astonished at you, a woman of your masc'lin' mind, to be led away by such nonsense! Whey's your eyes? Whey's your feelings?

Whey's your reason? Why, don't they prove to you that the earth stands still—perfectly still? Why, if the earth was to turn over once—only once—wouldn't all the water be spilt out of the rivers and the seas? Wouldn't all the cities tumble down? Wouldn't all the inhabitants be dropped off and fall down to—to—to—goodness knows whey! You may go and tell that to the horse marines, not to me! My own senses tells me that this good, solid earth under our feet stands still, thank goodness! And my reason warns me what would happen, if it turned over only once."

And with this, the comfortable, self-satisfied old lady folded her arms over her old black satin gown, reclined back in her chair and rocked lazily to and fro.

Now, my better informed young reader, do not condemn worthy Mrs. Morset too hastily. Perhaps you do not understand her. She was a positive philosopher! Yes, she was. And that is a position of dignity, above all the teachings of faith. Mrs. Morset rejected all material theories that were not evident to her material senses. She was a positivist on the lowest plane.

But in these days of progress, when certain eminent philosophers repudiate all Christian revelation, with everything else that cannot be demonstrated by their science, we are reminded of Mrs. Morset as the first positivist we ever knew; for this worthy old lady is not a mere creation of fancy.

Miss Gunn was fast getting into position to fire away, when she was interrupted by the opening of the door and the entrance of the tardy nieces in their "reconstructed" toilets.

Rose and Lily wore maize-colored challis dresses, with white lace undersleeves and collars and pearl jewelry, a style that well became their dusky brunette beauty.

Bab wore a pink Chambray cambric, with white book muslin ruffles at her throat and wrists.

Not on any account would Miss Gunn permit even her youngest niece to dress *décolleté*.

The girls had scarcely greeted their relations and taken their seats when the other guests arrived almost *en masse*.

Mr. and Mrs. Wolfsohn entered first, followed by Mr. Gladden, Miss Mesh and little Fance.

Then came Capt. and Mrs. Blantyre, with Mrs. Somers, Miss Fleurie and Master Eustace.

Lastly, Gen. Curiatio Bibb and Dr. Cleveland.

All these required prompt attention.

Cousin Wally Lambe received the gentlemen and conveyed them to a large bedchamber where they might brush their hair, and so forth.

Miss Rose Bibb escorted the ladies into the best spare room, where they might lay off their hats and mantles and rearrange their toilets.

In a few minutes the whole party were reassembled in the drawing room.

Dr. Cleveland and Gen. Bibb were soon deeply engaged in the discussion of the Mexican War, from the opposite points of view taken on this occasion by the Christian minister and the military hero.

Dr. Cleveland advocated the peace policy, declaring that it was an outrage on civilization and Christianity to go to war in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Gen. Bibb asserted that the war was not only a patriotic but a holy one, and he should take the field himself if his invalided condition had not precluded the possibility of his doing so.

Yet any looker-on who did not know the men would have taken the short, round-bodied, smooth-faced and bald-headed old soldier for the doctor of divinity, and the tall, dark, black-bearded, eagle-nosed and hawk-eyed parson for the martial general.

When dinner was announced Miss Gunn took the arm of Dr. Cleveland, and the two grenadiers led the way to the dining room at the back of the parlor.

Stout Gen. Bibb and plump Mrs. Morset rolled or waddled after them. Capt. Blantyre took Mrs. Wolfsohn, while Mr. Wolfsohn escorted Mrs. Blantyre; Cousin Wally Lambe escorted Miss Mesh, followed by Mrs. Somers on the arm of Dr. Dutton.

The gentlemen of the party having been appropriated by the elder ladies, the younger followed in pairs as they might—the two Misses Morset together and the two elder Misses Bibb together, then the two little Misses Fleetwood, until the procession was brought up by the very last

couple, Master Eustace Fleetwood and his new flame, Miss Bab Bibb.

A party of twenty sat down to the long, well-covered table, and soon gave the good dinner appreciative attention.

The guests enjoyed themselves, to Miss Gunn's delight, for the fact of their doing so seemed a tribute to her hospitality and good management.

The feast was so great a success that the party lingered long over each course, talking, laughing and jesting, and happily, for the time, forgetting all about the war.

After dinner they returned to the drawing room, where card tables were set out for all who chose to amuse themselves with the sober game of whist—about the only game of cards understood in those parts at that time.

Dr. Cleveland and Miss Gunn, as partners, sat down at one table, with Gen. Bibb and Mrs. Morset as antagonists.

Capt. and Mrs. Blantyre, Mr. and Mrs. Wolfsohn, made a second card party.

Mr. Gladden, Mrs. Somers, Miss Mesh and Dr. Dutton, a third.

The other ladies and the children, all under the convoy of Cousin Wally Lambe, strolled out into the pleasant old-fashioned garden, where flourished red roses of every shade from faintest blush to deepest crimson, and white roses of every grade from purest snow to richest cream color, where towered gorgeous sunflowers, where crowded hollyhocks of every hue, larkspurs, pink, white, blue and purple, bachelors' buttons, flags, sweet-williams, wall-flowers, pinks of all possible colors, and scores of other lovely old-fashioned flowers, whose very names are now forgotten; where grew every sort of spicy, fragrant sweet herb, and fruit bushes bordered every vegetable bed.

Long the young people wandered in the labyrinth of this old garden, or sat chatting in its arbors; and then they rambled off into the delicious peach and apple orchards to regale themselves with the fruit plucked fresh from the trees.

They remained out until the sun set behind the west bank of Low River, and then, being summoned by the

tea bell, they returned to the house to find the long table spread with a dainty repast of tea, coffee, milk, cream, a variety of cakes, biscuits, preserves and fresh fruit, together with more substantial fare for those who required it.

The delicious tea was enjoyed as much as the dinner had been, and when the party arose from the table they were greeted by the sounds of the fiddle and the tambourine, played by two of Miss Barbra's colored men, who were skilled, though self-taught, musicians, who had been called from the quarters to play quadrilles for the young people.

They immediately formed sets and spent the whole evening in dancing.

All danced except five persons, Miss Gunn, Mrs. Morset, Beth, Erma and Dr. Cleveland.

These sat apart engaged in conversation while watching the dancers with as much interest as a theatrical audience watches the ballet.

It was a constant source of amusement to the spectators to observe with what zest a poor, depressed spirit like Cousin Wally's enjoyed the pastime, and how lightly the heavy-bodied old Gen. Bibb bounded about, and how suddenly the faded maidens, Miss Morset and Miss Mesh, became youthful again.

"My! That man bounces about like a balloon!" said Mrs. Morset, referring to Gen. Bibb.

"Balloons don't bounce!" snapped Miss Gunn.

"Well, then, like a boy's football."

"That don't bounce, either, except when it's kicked up."

Mrs. Morset was put down for a moment, but quickly rallied, changed her base, and returned to the attack from another quarter.

"Now, then; suppose the earth was to turn now, only once, as you say it is always turning, what a scatteration there would be among these people! Tumbling over and over, heels over head, with tables, and chairs, and lamps, and fiddle, and banjos, and all, after the roof, and chimneys, and walls, and floors, that would go first."

"What nonsense! I tell you the earth does move, Sister Morset!"

"Tell you it don't, Sister Barbra! It can't, you see!"

And at it they went, with as much zeal as ever inspired an orthodox and hetrodox philosopher, arguing on a higher plane, the present day—and with this peculiarity, that the one who was in the wrong had the best of the argument.

At eleven o'clock the pleasant party broke up, and the guests separated and took their several roads homeward, through a beautiful, moonlit summer night.

"Well!" said Miss Gunn, when all was over, the lights put out, the house locked up, and she herself, in night-gown and slippers, was seated in her flag-bottomed rocking-chair, in her bedroom, with her maid, Minny, standing behind her, combing out her strong, grizzled gray hair—"well, this party has been the finest of the year! Everybody enjoyed themselves, and my heart didn't beat in the back of my head once."

"Aunt Barbra," said Bab, who was the old lady's bed-fellow, as she had been from the age of three years—"Aunt Barbra, is it true?"

"What true?"

"What I heard you and Mrs. Capt. Blantyre talking about this afternoon.

"What was that?"

"Why—why—that I am to go to school to Mrs. Somers, at Blantyre House."

"Yes, miss, it is true."

"When am I to go, Aunt Barbra?"

"As soon as the class opens again, on the first of September."

"But what am I to go to school for, Aunt Barbra?"

"To learn that the earth turns round, for one thing," said Miss Barbra.

"But I knew that long ago. Couldn't you get a governess to come here and teach the other things?"

"Go to bed, Bab, or I'll box your ears," snapped Miss Barbra, as she tied on her voluminous nightcap.

Bab obeyed.

Miss Barbra Gunn's party was the first of a series of entertainments given to the officers about to depart for the seat of war.

We have described it only for the sake of introducing all the main characters in our story, and as this one was

typical of all the other feasts, we need treat no more in detail, but merely mention that Gen. Bibb, of The Hill, gave the next dinner and dance; Mrs. Morset, of The Dale, the third one; the Blantyres, of Blantyre House, the fourth; Mr. Gladden, of Brighthome, the fifth, and the Wolfsohns, of Darkwood, the sixth and last.

These hospitalities followed one after the other, day after day, and lasted from morning until nearly midnight; beginning on each occasion with an early dinner and finishing with a late dance.

The only children present at these merry-makings were the little Fleetwoods, who came with their governess, without any sacrifice of time, for these were their August holidays.

Such a season of festivity, not to say of dissipation, had never before been known in the neighborhood. But it had one good effect—it kept the minds of those on the eve of separation so much occupied that they had no time to brood over the coming pang of parting.

The Wolfsohn party was the last, as I said. It took place on Saturday, and broke up at ten o'clock at night, a little earlier than usual, on account of the near approach of the Sabbath.

This left one quiet day on which the parties concerned could recollect themselves and interchange last words and counsels before parting, for the regiment was to leave on Monday.

On this last Sunday all went to church, where Dr. Cleveland preached an appropriate sermon.

That last evening Rodolph and Erma sat long together under the roof of the old piazza in front of their house overlooking the briery banks of Low River—very low now, in the long August drought.

"Erma, Erma, my beloved," whispered Rodolph, with his arm around her waist, "is there nothing more that you have to say to me on this last night?"

"Oh, I had so much to say to you! But I have forgotten. I cannot remember now; I cannot even think. I can only feel, feel that we are parting for years. Oh, Heaven, parting, it may be, forever! My heart is breaking, Rodolph," she cried, clinging to him, burying her

face on his bosom and weeping convulsively, like a broken-spirited child.

"Erma! Be a heroine, my dear," he murmured, gently, bending his head over hers, smoothing her hair with gentle hands and pressing a kiss on her brow—"be brave, Erma."

"Oh, I cannot! I cannot! I am unworthy of you, Rodolph, I am unworthy of you in every way."

"What do you mean, Erma?" he inquired, uneasily, for that secret that lay between them made him strangely alive and sensitive to every vague expression of this kind. "What do you mean by being unworthy, Erma?"

"Oh! I ought to be strong! I ought to be brave! I ought to cheer and comfort you, leaving home for the war; instead of which I only depress and worry you," she answered, sorrowfully.

"No, no, Erma! You do not, dear. But, Erma, now on this last night—this eve of our separation, if you could but bring yourself to confide to me that secret of your past that I see is wearing you to death—if you could lay that burden on my true heart, Erma, I might so bear it for you as to prove——"

She interrupted him with words piercing in their terror and anguish:

"Oh, no, no, no, I must not! Cannot! Dare not! It is not my secret. And I am bound by an oath."

"Not your secret, yet it concerns you vitally?"

"Yes, yes, you knew that. Dear Rodolph, do me justice. I told you, before we were married, that I had a secret which I could not share even with my husband," she answered, wringing her hands.

"You did, you did, Erma."

"And you promised that I should keep it unquestioned."

"I did. I spoke now only for your sake, dearest, that I might draw that rankling arrow out of your bosom, if possible."

"Rodolph, are you sorry that you married me, with this mystery in my life?" she whispered, hoarsely.

"Erma! No! Not for a moment have I felt any emotion but joy in thinking of our union," he replied, bend-

ing over her still bowed head, and parting the raven hair on her forehead, that he might press his lips there.

"Rodolph, some day, if I live long enough, I will tell you the terrible secret of my life. It may be when you return from the war, or it may be years hence before I am free to disclose it. And, oh, Rodolph! Oh, my husband! how you will pity me then!"

"I pity you now, poor girl! And I trust you infinitely, Erma!" he whispered.

She lifted his hand and kissed it humbly, as if he had been a king.

The next day the regiment marched.

CHAPTER XIX.

A TERRIBLE SUMMONS.

Give us good proofs of what you have alleged.
'Tis not enough to say—in such a bush
There lies a thief—in such a cave a beast—
But you must show him to me, e'er I shoot,
Else I may kill one of my straggling sheep,
I'm fond of no one's person, but their spirit.

—CROWN.

When Erma had seen the last of her husband, as he rode away alone in the gray of the morning to join his regiment at Ice Cliff, on the eve of marching, she turned into the house, flew to her chamber, and threw herself upon her bed to give way to the passion of tears repressed so long.

Old Minty found her there, still sobbing as if her heart would break.

The woman did not disturb her, but went noiselessly about the chamber restoring it to order, and, above all, taking care to gather up and put out of sight all the little personal belongings of her master that he had left behind.

"For," she said to herself, "nothing grieved my heart more dan to come suddenly on a hand'cher or ap'on or anything dat 'longed to one o' my poor chillun after dey was sold away from me. Ah, well! Poor chillun! De Lord will wipe away all tears from our eyes by an' by. Here is nuffin' but partin' an' sorrow for some ob us. Dere is nuffin' but meetin' and' 'joicin' 'mong friends:

"'Oh, dat'll be joyful!
Joyful, joyful, joyful!
Oh, dat'll be joyful—
To meet to part no more!
To meet to part no more
On Canaan's happy shore—
Where we shall meet
At Jesus' feet,
An' meet to part no more,'"

she hummed in a low, soft tone as she went about her noiseless work.

Presently she noticed that the sobs of her mistress were subsiding, and having finished her work, she slipped silently out of the room and went down to prepare some fragrant tea and rich cream toast, which she presently brought up on a little salver covered with a snow-white cloth.

She found her mistress sitting up on the side of the bed, wiping the last tears from her face.

Minty set the salver down on a little stand, and then took up stand and all and placed before her mistress, saying:

"Here, ma'am. Please take somethin'. I see you didn't take a thing when master was havin' his coffee an' chop before he left. Come, mist'ess. Let me see you try to eat a little, for all our sakes."

Erma smiled sadly, but gratefully, on this motherly old creature, and took up the cup of tea and drank it and ate a little of the toast.

"Dat's right, my mist'ess. Now take heart, my dear young mist'ess, and 'sider how soon and how often you can hear from de colonel," said Minty.

Rodolph Wolfsohn was only a lieutenant of volunteers, but from the time she had first seen him in his uniform Minty had promoted her master to a colonelcy.

"I do, Minty. I know he will write from every stopping place."

"And 'sider, honey, how he goes of his own f'ee will! Law! 'tain't like he was 'pelled to go, whedder or no!"

"Indeed, it is not! He went a volunteer. That should console me.'

"So it ought, my mist'ess. 'Tain't wid f'ee w'ite ladies and gent'men like it is wid poor slabes! Like it was wid

me and my poor chillun, when dey was sold away from me, and we was parted agin' our wills, agin' our breakin' hearts, and we didn't know where dey was gwine to, and couldn's hear from each other, no, never no more! And had no comfort, my mist'ess, 'cept in the knowledge dat we was all—far and nigh—all in de keepin' ob de dear Lord, and couldn't be tuk out'n His keepin' not by no one. I didn't know where my poor chillun was, but He knowed! He had His eye on ebery one ob dem, and that was my comfort! And is now! Yes, and is now! I shall see my chillun again.

"'When we shall meet
At Jesus' feet,
An' meet to part no more,'"

said this simple-minded, pure-hearted child of faith, meekly folding her thin black hands, while the light of a holy joy irradiated her dark face.

"Aunty, dear, will you pray for my husband that he may be preserved from the perils of battle and permitted to return to us in safety?" said Erma, in a low voice.

"I has so prayed, my mist'ess, and I shall so pray, continually mornin' and night," replied Minty, as, mindful of her practical duties amid all her spiritual counsels, she lifted the little salver with the breakfast service, and carried it out of the room.

Old Minty's conversation and example had really strengthened and comforted her young mistress. That this poor slave woman, this bereaved and afflicted mother, this simple, ignorant creature, who could not even read her Bible, should be so iluminated by the light of Christian faith and hope, seemed a revelation and a wonder to the heart and mind of the sorrowing young wife.

"Oh, how much heavier and more bitter have been her afflictions than any that I have now to endure in the absence of my husband; yet how resigned is her heart, how assured is her mind. I will take a lesson from you, good Minty," said Erma, as she aroused herself to go about her daily duties.

For Erma not only kept her own house, but also assisted in the work, so as to relieve old Minty of a part of the burden.

During the day she had several visitors.

First came Miss Beth Morset, with her thin, pale face and smooth flaxen hair and light blue eyes, looking more like a faded-out blonde than ever before in her gray dress and plain straw bonnet.

She had come, in the recognition of her neighborly duty, to keep Mrs. Wolfsohn company for a little while after the departure of that lady's husband.

Miss Beth laid off her straw bonnet and drew out her knitting and sat down to spend the day at least, the night also if she should be invited to do so.

She had walked over from The Dale, for the early September day was cool and fine.

Later on came Mrs. Blantyre on horseback, attended by a mounted groom—Mrs. Blantyre looking as bright, blooming and happy in her blue merino riding habit and jaunty black hat with blue feathers as if she, also, had not a few hours before parted from her husband.

"Came because I knew you would be fretting, Erma," she said, as she took off her gloves, hat and habit in the hall bedroom and shook down her black silk dress and arranged her lace cuffs and collar. "I knew you would be fretting, though it is not of the least use to fret. They have both gone—our vagabonds—of their own sweet wills, so why should we cry after them? It is not as if they had been transported by the laws of the country and for the good of society, against the grain, as no doubt they deserved to be. They have gone from a truant disposition. Patriotism? Not a bit of it. Love of adventure. That is what is the matter with them!"

So Mrs. Blantyre rattled on as she arranged her toilet; not that she was so heartless as she pretended, but because she wished to keep up a noise to deaden the voice of regret moaning in her own bosom.

Erma, scarcely yet able to speak for the fullness of her heart, led the way to the parlor, where they found Miss Beth sitting by the front window, still steadily knitting.

"Ah! you here, Miss Elizabeth? I'm so glad. The more the merrier, you know," said Mrs. Blantyre, shaking hands with the first visitor, who had risen to receive her.

"Thank you; yes, I came over this morning, thinking

Mrs. Wolfsohn would feel lonesome the first day," said Miss Beth, gravely.

"What a lovely day it is," remarked Mrs. Blantyre, drawing her own knitting from her pocket and seating herself at the other front window. "Yet I see you have a fire here, Erma," she continued, glancing at the bright blaze from pine logs and cones that lighted up the chimney place.

"Yes—it is quite cool enough for one, and, besides, a fire on the hearth is such a pleasant companion that I seize every little excuse to have one," replied Erma.

"Well, it is cozy."

"Mrs. Blantyre, has my little cousin, Barbra Bibb, joined your home school yet?" inquired Miss Beth, drawing out her needle and beginning anew.

"Yes; a little heathen! She is the miniature likeness of her Aunt Barbra. Why, she has even caught up Miss Gunn's habit of swearing!" exclaimed Mrs. Blantyre.

"I know it. It is very shocking," sighed Miss Beth, with a shudder.

"Oh, she means no more by an oath than other people do by an exclamation. She made my children open their eyes, though, I tell you. However, it is not possible Flurry and Rooster should follow such an example, and, after all, Mrs. Somers will be sure to break her of the habit," said Mrs. Blantyre, cheerfully.

"I do confess that I was in no slight degree surprised when I heard that you had consented to receive Bab Bibb in your home school with your own children," said the spinster, gravely.

"Why, Miss Beth! Of course, I would receive the poor, neglected, motherless child!—and all the more willingly on account of her deficiencies and her needs. She will gain good, and my children no evil," answered Mrs. Blantyre, brightly.

"Yes, yes, I see you are right, and I stand rebuked," said Miss Beth, bowing over her knitting, without for an instant stopping the needles. While they were still speaking, a lumbering carriage rolled up to the door, driven by old Jehial, Miss Gunn's coachman, and occupied by Miss Gunn and her two nieces, the elder Misses Bibb.

"We called to see how you are getting along, Mrs. Wolfsohn, and whether we can be of any service to you," said Miss Barbra, when she and her party had exchanged greetings with the hostess and her other visitors.

"My neighbors are very kind. I thank you very much, Miss Gunn," said Erma, earnestly.

"Oh, well, you know in a case like this neighbors must be useful to each other, or be set down as heathen," said the old lady.

"Pray come into the other room and lay off your bonnet, my dear Miss Gunn," said Erma.

"No, no, my dear child, not at all. We didn't come to stay. We didn't come to stay. We wouldn't take you by storm that way. Besides, I see you have company enough already, you know—and we only came to say that if you would like one of the girls to keep you company for a few days, until you get used to your loneliness, why, either of them would be happy to do so."

"You are all very kind to me, Miss Gunn, and I should be happy to have either or both these young ladies," replied Erma, with a bow in their direction.

"Oh! I wouldn't impose both on you. Enough is as good as a feast. Besides, I couldn't spare both, now Bab's away. Come to think of it, Susan Blantyre, how is Bab getting on?"

"Very well, I hope, Miss Barbra, though it is early now to judge, you know."

"Yes, so it is. Hello! Who is that stopping before the door? I declare if it ain't Gen. Bibb's Olive, driving the light cart herself!"

All looked out at the indication of Miss Gunn's finger and saw the neat little one-horse wagon standing before the door, with the pretty quadroon woman, in her bright plaid turban and red calico dress, seated on the box, with hampers and baskets around her.

"She is on her way to or from the country store, I reckon, but I don't know what she has stopped here for!" said Miss Rose Bibb.

"Yes'm, I am coming in," was the rather irrelevant reply of the woman, as she alighted and hitched her horse and turned around the end of the house to present herself at the back door.

A few minutes later old Sept entered the parlor with a note in one hand and a hamper on his right arm, and a covered basket on his left.

Awkwardly enough, on account of his laden limbs, he saluted the company by tugging at his forelock, and then, as well as he could, holding the note toward his mistress, with the exclamation:

"Miss Olive fotch it, wid de 'spectful compliments ob Gen. Bibb to you, ma'am."

The lady took the note and opened it, asking permission of her guests to read it.

" 'Give wine to him who is heavy of heart,' and to her also, I presume. In compliance with this benign order, I send you, with some of my best fruit, a hamper of the lightest vintage of France—a beverage that, in your very moderate use, will, like your favorite cup of Hyson, 'cheer, but not inebriate.' I kiss your hands and remain your servant, C. B."

"Now ain't that Curiatio Bibb to a T!" said Miss Gunn, when Erma had read this note aloud to her friends.

"Everyone is so kind to me!" said Erma, with tears in her eyes.

"And his kindness always has 'a body in it,' " said Miss Beth.

"Set that hamper and basket down here and let us see what is in it," commanded Miss Gunn in an authoritative voice, forgetting that she was not on her own quarter-deck.

Old Sept hesitated and looked at his mistress. He did not understand obeying any other orders in that house except those of Mrs. Wolfsohn.

"Do as Miss Gunn bids you, Septimus, and open the bundle," said Erma.

The old man put the hamper and the basket down upon the floor and knelt between them.

He took the top off the basket first, displaying some of the largest and most luscious peaches, plums, apricots, pears and grapes that ever were seen—fruit that must have gained the first prize at any horticultural fair.

"Ah! they are some of his very primest!" exclaimed Miss Gunn.

"They fill the room with an aromatic perfume," said Erma, gratefully.

Meanwhile, old Septimus took the top off the hamper, drew out a long-necked, light-colored bottle filled with a golden-hued fluid, and handed it to Miss Gunn for inspection.

"'Chablis'!" exclaimed the old lady, reading the label, "I know port, and sherry, and claret, and all the rest, but what in the dee is chablis?"

Only Miss Gunn didn't say "the dee," but she gave his unmentionable majesty his full name and title.

"Oh, it is a delicate white wine that won't hurt anybody. We brought some home with us when we returned from the North," answered Mrs. Blantyre.

"Well, I like a little color in wine myself. Good port wine is good enough for me!" exclaimed Miss Gunn.

"Septimus, where did you leave Olive?" inquired Mrs. Wolfsohn.

"In de kitchen, habbing ob a chat along of Aunt Minty, mist'ess."

"Ask her to wait for an answer. I must acknowledge Gen. Bibb's thoughtful goodness. And now, Septimus, take these things to the pantry and put them carefully away."

"Yes, mist'ess."

"And, Septimus, see that Miss Gunn's carriage and horses are driven around to the stable and put up."

"Yes, mist'ess," said the old man, taking up his load and preparing to leave the room.

"Oh, but indeed, my dear Mrs. Wolfsohn, you know I told you we did not come to stay," objected Miss Gunn.

"My dear Miss Barbra, I should scarcely have presumed to press you to stay to our plain family dinner; but now that we have this delicate wine and delicious fruit to offer you, I must really venture to insist upon your remaining to share it with us. Come, pray come and lay off your bonnets," said the young hostess, with a courteous gesture of invitation to the three ladies from The Marsh.

"Well, since you do insist upon it, and as it is very seldom I leave home except to attend church," said Miss Gunn, with a gracious smile, and she arose with her two

nieces and followed Erma to the hall chamber, where she laid off all her wraps and made herself comfortable for the day.

Her nieces followed her example, and then they all returned to the parlor, where they were very much surprised to find old Mr. Gladden and his inseparable companion, little Fance Fleetwood.

"I did not know that you were receiving, my dear," said the old gentleman, with an amused smile, after he had greeted Mrs. Wolfsohn and the ladies from The Marsh.

"My neighbors have overwhelmed me with kindness to-day," replied Erma.

"Yes, so I perceive. I merely dropped in to see you and offer my services. By the way, my dear, I hope Rodolph succeeded in procuring a reliable overseer for this place during his absence?"

"No, indeed, he has not. It was a serious regret to him in leaving. I must try to find one," said Erma.

"And I will endeavor to help you. Well, my child, I only called to say just this much to you, and now we will take leave, Fance and I," said the old gentleman.

"Indeed, no, you will do no such thing. Our plain early dinner is just going on the table, and you shall not scorn our humble fare in such an off-hand manner. You will stay and dine with us, Mr. Gladden," said Mrs. Wolfsohn, peremptorily.

"And I want to stay with dear Erma myself, I do," added Fance.

"Then you shall, if Mrs. Wolfsohn will kindly make room for us at her table," concluded Mr. Gladden.

And so it was settled that Erma Wolfsohn, instead of being permitted to mope in solitude, had an accidental surprise dinner-party from her nearest neighbors—accidental on the part of the guests, for there was no concerted action between them, nor did one set know that there was any such intention in another, and a complete surprise on the part of the hostess, who had no reason to expect a visit from any one of them.

But, like many impromptu parties of pleasure, this friendly dinner was a most enjoyable one.

The visitors even consented to remain for tea; but be-

fore that refreshment was placed upon the table, the circle was joined by the Rev. Dr. Cleveland, who thought the occasion a proper one for making a pastoral call, and by Dr. Dutton, who came both as family physician and friend, to look after the health and spirits of his young neighbor.

It was a lovely September evening, and the sky was so clear and the stars so brilliant that the night was almost as bright as the full moonlight could have made it.

The visitors stayed until quite a late hour, and then departed, leaving good Miss Beth Morset to keep the hostess company.

The reaction came to the poor, forsaken wife, however. When she had seen her kind-hearted visitor made comfortable in the best bedroom for the night—the comparatively elegantly upholstered bedroom that had been Rodolph's mother's—and when she had afterward retired to her own chamber, from whence, more than from all other places, she missed her husband, Erma broke down in bitter grief and spent the night in weeping.

The morning brought her no refreshment after such a sleepless night, but the day brought some little comfort, and one tremendous rallying shock that roused her from her indulgence in grief and compelled her to prompt and energetic action.

By previous orders, old Septimus had started early that morning to bring letters from the post office at Ice Cliff.

While Mrs. Wolfsohn and her guest, Miss Beth Morset, were lingering over their breakfast, old Septimus entered with the mail bag, and with a low bow presented it to his mistress.

"You will excuse me, Miss Elizabeth," said Erma, with a deprecating smile, as she eagerly, with trembling fingers, opened the bag.

"Oh, certainly! Of course! Pray, never let there be any ceremony between us," said Miss Beth, heartily. By this time Erma had turned out the contents of the mail bag—a newspaper, which she handed to Miss Beth, and three letters, two of which she pushed aside without a glance to wait their turn until she should have read the third, which she recognized by the handwriting to be her husband's missive.

It was very short, having been written on their march, and in great haste, to catch a mail about to go. It merely assured her of his good health and spirits, and of his ardent, undying affection for herself, enjoined her to be of good courage, to take care of her precious self, and to lose no time in securing the services of a good overseer. It concluded by promising to write again by the first mail from their next halting place.

Over and over and over she read this letter, scarcely heeding, scarcely even remembering the two that lay unopened before her, looking so harmless in appearance, yet being such bombshells in reality.

At last reluctantly she folded her letter, and stealthily slipped it into her bosom.

Then she carelessly took up the two others and looked at their superscription. One was in a strange handwriting. She laid that down and examined the other.

This was in the handwriting of her friend, Bishop Whiting. Seeing this she grew more interested, and eagerly broke the seal.

Why did her face grow pale as ashes while she read? Why did she drop the letter from her shaking hands, and sink back in her chair moaning a prayer for help in her extremity?

Miss Beth, busily reading the newspaper, heard that wail of distress, looked up, grew frightened at what she saw in Erma's face, and anxiously inquired:

"What is the matter? I hope there is no ill news?"

"Oh, yes! yes! yes! Dire, dire news! No! no! no! Not that! I did not know what I was saying! Oh-h-h——"

She abruptly paused, covered her face with her hands and moaned.

"Try to compose yourself. Here—take this glass of water. What has occurred? Any mishap to the regiment? To Mr. Wolfsohn?" inquired Miss Beth, pressing attention on her hostess.

"No, no," wailed Erma, striving to recover her self-command. "No, nothing of the sort. Forgive me. I have friends in the North and they are in trouble. I—I shall have to go to them."

"That is right. Try to calm yourself. Who wrote to you?"

"Bishop Whiting," answered Erma, looking around eagerly for the letter that had fallen from her hands, and picking it up from the floor.

"But here is another letter that you seem to have forgotten," said Miss Beth, indicating a third one that lay unheeded on the table—the letter that has already been noticed as having a superscription in a strange hand.

Erma picked it up, moaning unconsciously, and looked at it closely.

It was not only in a strange hand, but in a very illiterate one, ill written and ill spelled.

She opened it, still moaning like one in deepest pain, and as she read, her speaking countenance rapidly changed with many varying expressions—distress, relief, gratitude, anxiety, swiftly succeeding each other, to settle at last in a look of fixed resolution.

CHAPTER XX.

A SUDDEN FLIGHT.

Started like a guilty thing
Upon a fearful summons. —SHAKESPEARE.

"Miss Beth," she said, in a firmer voice than she had yet been able to command, "I must leave here for the North to-day."

"Heavens, Mrs. Wolfsohn! You cannot mean it!" exclaimed poor Miss Beth, in dismay, fearing that troubles of all sorts had turned her hostess' brain.

"Yes, I do, good friend. I must start to-day. I must hasten to the bedside of a near and dear friend who is in extremity."

"Was that the bishop's news?" inquired the still amazed spinster.

"Yes, it was. And now, dear Miss Beth, will you do a distressed woman one Christian act of kindness?"

"Certainly—of course I will. I would do anything in the world that I could do, and do it with pleasure. But, my dear Mrs. Wolfsohn, who is this relation of yours

who is very ill? I believe I heard that your parents had both passed away. Did I not?"

"I presume you must have heard that," said Erma, her pale face flushing at the consciousness of her total evasion of Miss Beth's questions. "Of course, you must have heard that. I think every one in the neighborhood has heard it."

"Certainly. Well, then, as it is neither of your parents, who is it that is lying so low? Of course, you know I will do all I can to help you."

"Thank you, dear Miss Beth! You are goodness itself! Well, then, this is what I would ask of you: When I am gone, will you make my adieux to all my kind friends and account to them and to all inquirers for my sudden departure by saying that I have received a letter, with painful news, from my old friend and voucher, Bishop Whiting, and that I had to hurry off at once to the bedside of a relative in extremity?"

"Yes, I will do so willingly. Is it your uncle or aunt?"

"Neither, dear Miss Beth."

"Then is it your brother or sister?"

"I never had either brother or sister, Miss Beth."

"Who is it, then?" persisted the spinster, in perfect unconsciousness of causing any embarrassment to her hostess, for she was as deficient in suspicion and in tact as she was full of sympathy and curiosity.

"A very dear friend, Miss Beth. And now will you kindly excuse me, while I go and prepare for my journey? I have so much to do! The work of several days to be compressed into a few hours."

"Yes, certainly, of course; and do call on me, if I can help you in any way."

"Thanks, I will," said Erma, hurrying away.

When she reached her room, she threw herself in her armchair and once more covered her face with her hands —a common gesture with her when she was strongly agitated—and exclaimed aloud:

"Oh, Heaven! could I ever have believed that anything could possibly happen to make me rejoice in the absence of my beloved husband! Yet now, how I thank Heaven that he is gone!

"Yet, oh, Rodolph! Rodolph! that the stress of fate

should force me to feel so! But there is no thought of disloyalty to you in this, my beloved! My adored!" she added, clasping her hands.

"Ah, may Heaven preserve you through all the perils of battle and restore you to me safe. And, oh! may I then be able to share with you this dire secret of my doomed life. It cannot last forever. Ah! what am I saying? I must not even wish it to end! No, for the day that loosens my tongue must—oh, Heaven! At what a price my liberty to speak must be purchased."

She dropped her clasped hands in her lap and bowed her head upon her chest, and remained buried in reverie for some moments.

Then rousing herself, she started up and began making rapid preparations for her sudden departure.

She packed a small traveling bag with the barest necessaries of travel—a change of underclothing and some combs and brushes.

Then she called both Minty and Septimus to her presence and told them of the urgent necessity of her departure, and gave her keys to the old woman, with directions to lock up all her effects and to take care of the house.

To Septimus she left the supervision of the plantation.

And, finally, she told the old man to have the carriage at the door by twelve o'clock to take her to the Red Fox to meet the stagecoach, that would pass there at six o'clock on its way to the North, and bade Minty have a light repast ready by half-past eleven for herself and Miss Beth, because they could get no dinner. And in this direction the young hostess' forethought was for her guest, not for herself.

The amazed servants prepared to obey in silence—their speech, almost their very breath, snatched away by the suddenness of the event.

Miss Beth, who had announced her intention of taking leave immediately after breakfast, now deferred her departure, with the benevolent purpose of driving with Erma to the Red Fox to see her off, and then returning home with the carriage.

She now gave such active and hearty assistance to her

hostess that the latter found all the few arrangements that it was possible to make in so short a time completed before eleven o'clock.

The servants also were very diligent in their own duties, so that, at a few minutes after the hour, a dainty meal of tea, bread, butter, fricassée chicken and fruit was neatly arranged upon the table.

Erma could force herself to take no more than a cup of tea; but Miss Beth, who, like most persons of a pale and thin habit of body without ill-health, had a good appetite, made a full meal.

Miss Beth's fat Aunt Morset used to call her "one of Pharaoh's lean kind." She meant "lean kine," but it was all the same.

While the friends were still at table, and Miss Beth still paying assiduous attention to some of Gen. Bibb's luscious apricots, old Sept came, bowing, hat in hand, and announced the carriage.

Miss Beth called anxiously for a covered basket, crowded the fruit into it, and arose to put on her bonnet and gloves.

In a few minutes they were seated in the carriage, with the old coachman on the box.

Poor Minty stood in the house door with her apron to her eyes.

"There is nothin' but partin' after partin' in dis world," she said, with a sob.

"Yes; there are many happy meetings, too, Aunt Minty," said Miss Beth.

"I ain't seen 'em, den, my young mist'ess," sighed the woman.

"Poor Minty! I am very sorry to leave you alone; but I shall return, Providence permitting, in two weeks," said Erma.

"Yes, mist'ess, you's very feeling-hearted. And, please, when you get to de Red Fox, please send Sept back soon's ebber de horses is rested, so he'll get here 'fore midnight. Oh, Lor'! If a storm was to come up an' de Thunder Debbil was to pear to me, all alone by myself on dis place, I don't think I would have grace and faith enough to stand it. I don't, indeed."

"Aunty," said Erma, compassionately, "don't stay here by yourself this afternoon. Look up the house and go over to the toll-keeper's at the bridge. He is a brother in your church, I believe?"

"Yes, my mist'ess—a cullered brudder in de Methody meetin'-house. Which likewise is his wife."

"Well, go over there and smoke your pipe with them, and Sept will call for you as he comes back and bring you home in the carriage."

"Thanky, my young mist'ess. You is always so 'siderate for de poor. I will clear up and put everything to rights first; 'caze I ain't afeard to stay here by myself in de daytime, when I have got de innocent dumb beasts to keep me company; but when night comes an' dey's all gone to sleep, den I gets lonesome and scarey. So when I done cleared up everything, I'll go to the toll cabin and spend de evening long o' Sister and Brudder Lucas," concluded Minty.

Then, with mutual blessings, the mistress and servant parted, and the carriage rolled away and took the road first toward Brighthome and then onward to the Red Fox.

Their course lay through the same beautiful, undulating region of wooded hills and vales over which Erma had passed in coming to the neighborhood during the preceding year—only then the season was late October, and the landscape wore the gorgeous livery of autumn, while now, in early September, it was still fresh and green with the luxuriant verdure of summer.

But no eyes nor heart had Erma for the beauty and glory of nature now. She sat back in the corner of her carriage, buried in troubled thoughts—scarecly rousing herself sufficiently to reply in monosyllables to the observations of Miss Beth. That good creature asked no more questions of her companion. She had perceived at length that Mrs. Wolfsohn had some reservations that she meant to retain.

After a few hours' ride through the beautiful country on that fine afternoon, they reached the Red Fox about five o'clock.

They had an hour to rest before the coming of the stagecoach that would stop there to change horses.

Erma ordered tea for herself and Miss Beth in a private sitting room, to avoid the company of strangers later on at the public table.

She sent her horses around to the stable to be rubbed down, fed, watered and rested, while she and her companion refreshed themselves in the parlor, and her old servant took a substantial supper in the kitchen.

A little after six o'clock Erma bade adieu to her friend and her servant, and took her seat in the great, top-heavy coach, and started on her first long night journey northward.

"Well, who's gwine to forsake de neighborhood nex', I would like to kno?" said old Sept, as he wiped his eyes with the cuff of his coat, and held the carriage door open for Miss Beth to enter.

"Heaven knows! I should not wonder at anybody leaving, or anything else happening. But I do wonder who she has gone to see?" added Miss Beth, more to herself than to Sept, for she was the last woman in the world to question a servant about the affairs of her mistress.

"L-o-r-d knows," drawled old Sept, in a despairing tone; "but this I can tell you, mist'ess, dat if it was only some poor old family servant who was sick and a-pinin' arter her, she would take dis long journey to see him soon as if it was a king."

"I believe she would. Well, Septimus, it is now after six o'clock. The horses have had a good rest, and they have now a very light weight. Drive as fast as you can —not to hurt them—and see if you cannot get home before ten o'clock. Dear me! Aunt Morset will be shocked half out of her senses to see me come home even at that hour; and I could not account for it by telling her of Mrs. Wolfsohn's sudden departure, for she wouldn't sleep a wink all night for thinking of it. No; I must defer explanations until to-morrow. Go on, Sept."

And Miss Beth settled herself back on the cushions, while Sept shut the carriage door and mounted to his seat and drove off.

Miss Beth, who enjoyed natural scenery, looked

through the windows, surveying the pleasant country with its green-wooded hills and valleys, its picturesque farm-houses and fruitful fields, as long as the sun shone upon them, and even as long as the twilight lingered.

Not until night veiled the landscape did she withdraw her eyes.

Then darkness, silence, solitude and the easy motion of the carriage gradually lulled her to sleep, and she slept soundly for more than two hours, when she was awakened by the stopping of the carriage and the voice of the coachman in conversation with some one without.

"Where are we, Septimus?" inquired Miss Beth, putting her head from the window, and recognizing the scene at the same moment.

"We is at de toll house, at Mr. Wally Lambe's bridge, mist'ess, and it ain't ten o'clock yet. And dis is Brudder and Sister Lucas, what keeps de toll, an' Aunt Minty here is waitin' for me to take her home, arter I set you down safe at your'n, mist'ess. Now, don't you be unpatient, Aunt Minty. I'll take Miss Beth dere in fifteen minutes, and be back here in half an hour or less time."

With these words, Uncle Sept drove over the old bridge, passed The Marsh, and turned down the cross-road or lane that ran between The Hill and The Marsh and led to The Dale.

It was about ten o'clock when they reached the long, low, white-framed cottage that was Mrs. Morset's home.

A light was burning in the sitting room, and shining brightly through the uncovered window.

Miss Beth got out of the carriage and hurried to the door.

She was admitted by Ruth, who had heard the vehicle drive up.

"Well! I had gin you up for to-night," said Mrs. Morset, the opponent of education.

"I was detained by Mrs. Wolfsohn," said Miss Beth, in explanation.

Meanwhile, old Sept had driven back to the river, crossed the bridge again, and taken up Aunt Minty at the toll house.

"Sept," said the old woman, as they drove on toward

Darkwood, "do you know what has come over our mist'ess to take her off so?"

"No, Minty, I don't. But dere's somethin' heavy hangin' over dat poor young head, min' I tell you, Minty. So pray for her. If ever I see anybody in need ob prayers it is she, Minty—our dear young mist'ess!"

CHAPTER XXI.

A CLEW TO THE MYSTERY.

Since she gave us all the slip. —BROWNING.

"So that is all you have got to tell me about this strange freak of Rody Wolfsohn's wife? Well, 'Lisabeth Morset, I do think you are the dumbest creetur I ever did know in all the days of my life! To be in the house 'long of her more'n twenty-four hours, and on the very spot when the letters come to her, and then to go with her to the Red Fox to take the stage, and to find out no more about the business that takes her off than you have! Well, it beats me! If I had been in your shoes I'd 'a' known all about it by this time."

Such was the tirade of disappointment and disgust with which the round-bodied little Mrs. Morset met her niece's account of the sudden deparrure of Erma Wolfsohn for the North, given while they sat at their early breakfast table.

"I went as far as politeness would justify, Aunt Morset," said Miss Beth, smoothing back her pale hair from her temples with her thin hand—a common movement of this delicate spinster.

Mrs. Morset sat back in her chair, and fanned herself slowly with her turkey wing—that was her way of expressing incredulous scorn.

"It wouldn't have done for Beth to have pushed herself into Mrs. Wolfsohn's secrets, you know, Aunt Morset," said Miss Betty, coming to her cousin's relief.

"Humph! What right has any young 'oman, and especially Rody Wolfsohn's wife, to have any secrets to take her off on this wild-goose chase?—that is what I want to know," sniffed the old lady, waving the turkey wing majestically.

"Oh, indeed, aunty, I never said, and never hinted, that Mrs. Wolfsohn had any secrets that all the world might not know. Nor do I believe that she has, either," earnestly disclaimed Miss Beth.

Mrs. Morset's big chin went up as high as any such double, treble and quadruple chin could possibly go. That was her only comment.

"She told me, aunty—or, rather, no, she did not tell me in so many words; but I think she gave me to understand, or else I may have only taken it for granted, that she was summoned to the deathbed of some aged relation," said Miss Beth, deprecatingly.

Mrs. Morset laughed a little, low, chuckling laugh that gently shook her fat sides until they quivered like a jelly.

Miss Beth looked humiliated.

"What a witness you would make on the stand, 'Lisabeth Morset! 'She told me,' or, no, 'she didn't tell.' 'She gave to understand, or else I took for granted.' Oh! wouldn't your uncle, Judge Morset, have turned you inside out?" And she chuckled again.

Then, turning to the short, stout black girl that was in attendance at the table, she suddenly exclaimed:

"Ruth, go and tell Luke to put the horse to the gig. I'm a-goin' to drive over to see Barbra Gunn and tell her, and hear what she has got to say about it. There has been some whisperings about Rody Wolfsohn's wife, before this, that I didn't half like. And now this thing happening, the very day after her husband left, looks queer, to say the least of it. 'Lisabeth, go and bring my big, black shawl and bonnet downstairs. Betty Morset, I want you to clean out the chany closet with your own hands, and don't trust nyther of them gals to handle the chany. Ruth, mind you finish paring them apples to dry, and have 'em done agin' I come back, or it'll be the worse for you. And, Betty Morset, I shan't stay to dinner at The Ma'sh, so I want a leg of salt pork biled with cabbage and white potatoes, and some apple dumpling, and don't use the loaf sugar to make the sass. And now I am ready to go."

And, having given all her orders for the day, and equipped herself for the journey, Mrs. Morset waddled

out to the gig, rolled herself up into it, and dropped into her seat.

Luke, her man-of-all-work, drove off through the farm to Bibb's Lane, and took the road to The Marsh, where he arrived in something less than twenty minutes.

There was no one in the house—or, rather, we should say, in either the old house or the new one, which, the reader may remember, stood facing each other, about twelve feet apart, with a plank path connecting them.

The young ladies had driven to Ice Cliff to do some autumn shopping, and Miss Gunn was out in the apple orchard, with bonnetless head and flaring cap borders and flying cap strings, superintending in person the gathering of apples for the cider press.

Mrs. Morset drove to the orchard and found her so.

"What's the matter now, Nelly, that you are here so early? Jehiel, be careful there! You are throwing the specked apples into the sound pile! If I have my eyes off you one minute you go wrong. Oh, here is Wally Lambe at last! Wally, look after these niggers, and see that they sort the apples right, while I go back to the house with Sister Morset. Come, Nelly," said Miss Barbra, turning from the group of laborers.

"Get offen your seat, Luke, and let Miss Barbra set there. She can drive as well as you, and you can walk on to the house. Come up here along of me," said the old lady, unceremoniously turning out her coachman to make room for her sister.

"And now, Nelly Morset, what is it? For I'm sure something very particular has brought you out this morning," said Miss Gunn, as she seated her majestic person beside her sister and took the reins in her hands.

"Drive on slowly toward the house, Barbra Gunn, and I'll tell you as we go along. Yes—it is something very particular and very uncommon, and, I think, very improper."

"What is it?" curtly demanded Miss Gunn.

"Rody Wolfsohn's wife has gone!"

"Gone! Gone where?"

"Gone off."

"But gone off where?"

"Ah! that's what nobody can tell."

"Good gracious, Nelly Morset! You don't mean to say the girl has run away?" exclaimed the scandalized old lady.

"Looks like it, anyways."

"You—you make my blood run cold! I had my doubts about that girl. When did she go?"

"Yesterday morning—the very next day after her husband left."

"Good gracious! Well, I did suspect that young person from the very first, though lately I have had more confidence in her. Who did she go with?"

"Oh, I didn't hear as she went 'long of anybody."

"Tell me all about it, Nelly Morset. Tell me every particular. This is perfectly dreadful! Oh, what a scandal! It is well poor Rodolph is off to the war. But if he ever catches that villain, he will shoot him down like a dog, all the same."

"What vilyun, Barbra? What are you talkin' about?"

"The villain she ran away with."

"I didn't tell you as she had gone off with any vilyun, Barbra Gunn."

"Well, then, what in the dee did you tell me?"

"Don't swear, Barbra. I told you as she had gone off—just gone off."

"I wish you would make your meaning clear, Nelly."

"Well, I'll just give you all the particulars, and then you can judge for yoursef," said Mrs. Morset.

And she related all the circumstances attending Erma Wolfsohn's sudden departure as they had been detailed to her by Miss Beth, and as they are known to the reader.

"Why, this puts an entirely different face upon the affair, Nelly Morset. It seems as if she had been summoned by letter to some friend or relation who is in extremity. Such a thing might happen suddenly to almost anyone at any time. Only her relations are so far off that she has to take a longer journey than most anyone else would be required to do," said Miss Gunn, who always liked to differ from her sister on any subject where difference of opinion was possible.

"Well, you may be as blind as you like, Barbra Gunn. But if she went to see any lawful relation or friend of

her'n, why couldn't she 'a' told 'Lisabeth Morset who it was, instead of prevaricating as she did? That is what I want to know!"

"And that is what I cannot tell you, of course. But we have no right, yet, to put a wrong construction on Erma Wolfsohn's action. We must wait and see how things turn out," said Miss Gunn, as she pulled up the horse at the door of the old house, where Luke almost immediately joined them to take the reins.

"Come in, Nelly, and spend the day, now you are here. It isn't often you come," said Miss Barbra, stepping out of the gig and holding her hand for her sister to alight.

"I can't stay all day, because I told them how I'd be home to dinner; but I'll come in and rest a bit," said Mrs. Morset, as she heavily descended from her seat and waddled after her tall sister into the old house, whose door stood hospitably open, revealing a large, low-ceiled room, with a broad fireplace on the left, filled up with fresh green boughs, a bare floor, with old flag chairs ranged around the whitewashed walls, an old mahogany tower-like clock in one corner of the chimney, and a glass cupboard in the other; a walnut table in one corner and a chest of drawers opposite, while at the farthest end of the room stood a four-post bedstead, covered with a homemade woolen counterpane, and piled with snow-white pillows.

"Minny, set that rocking chair here for Mrs. Nelly, and go and make two tumblers of nice, strong, peach-brandy toddy and bring 'em here, with a plate of ginger-bread," said Miss Barbra, as she seated herself in an old armchair, panting from her morning's fatigue.

The girl obeyed in every particular.

And, when Mrs. Morset had partaken of these highly stimulating refreshments, she bade her sister good-by, waddled off to her gig, tumbled up into her seat, dropped upon the cushions, and was driven home by her coachman.

But the news soon spread all over the neighborhood that young Mrs. Wolfsohn had gone off suddenly on the day after her husband's departure, no one knew exactly where, or wherefore.

The story was told with many variations, exaggerations and conjectures.

It reached the ears of Dr. Cleveland, who went, in sore anxiety of mind, to The Dale to make inquiries of Miss Beth Morset, who was understood by all to have been with the subject of this nine days' wonder on the day of her flight—for "flight" the journey of the young lady had been called by the gossip mongers.

Miss Beth told the rector the truth, as far as she herself knew it, and thereby much relieved his mind.

"If, as it seems, our dear young friend left home in response to a letter from Bishop Whiting, of course there cannot be the slightest peg to hang an injurious thought upon; but it was an oversight to be regretted that she did not mention the name of the relative to whom she has gone," said Mr. Cleveland.

"It is a pity that Mrs. Wolfsohn, coming here a stranger as she did, has always been so very reserved about her family and friends in the North, and even about her own personal history," said Miss Beth, with a sincere friendliness that could not be mistaken for disappointed curiosity or malignant innuendo.

"It is, indeed," frankly admitted the rector; "yet, you will remember, my dear Miss Morset, that there are natures so delicate, so sensitive, so reticent, that they cannot brook to speak of themselves, their lives, or their troubles. Of such, I think, is our young friend. Remember, also, and remind all those who are inclined to criticise Mrs. Wolfsohn, that she came to us commended by Bishop Whiting, who, in addition to his correspondence with Mr. Gladden, wrote me a special letter invoking my good offices in behalf of the young stranger."

"Indeed, I shall remember and report that," said Miss Beth, so cordially that her reverened suitor was emboldened to say:

"And now, my dear young lady, to come to a subject that is nearest of all others to my heart You cannot have misinterpreted my frequent——"

"Excuse me—I think I hear Aunt Morset calling!" exclaimed Miss Beth, in a tremor, as she arose and hurried from the room, leaving the worthy doctor *plantée là.*

Miss Beth told no fib. She was too conscientious to tell even the very whitest lie. She did hear Mrs. Morset

calling, but not calling her—calling, in fact, her manservant, Luke Bottom.

But was it not astonishing that Miss Beth, good church woman that she was, should have so persistently snubbed the suit of the handsome and worthy doctor of divinity, to remain constant to a dissipated scamp of a cousin who had gone to Texas, or some other Tartarus? I confess that my own sex is more of a puzzle to me than even our natural enemy.

The rector sighed, put his broad-brimmed hat on his head, asked Ruth, who was in attendance, to excuse him to the ladies, mounted his fat, white cob, and rode off.

When the report of Mrs. Wolfsohn's escapade was brought to Mrs. Blantyre by no less a person than Miss Betty Morset, that sunny-tempered lady received it without any manifestation of surprise.

"I don't see why people should make such an ado about it, Miss Betty. We all knew, in the beginning, that Erma Wildering's friends and relations resided in the North. That some near relative should be taken extremely ill, and that she should be summoned in haste, is, no doubt, painful enough to her; but I really do not see what we have got to do with it," she said.

"Neither do I, Mrs. Blantyre. But people do say that she ought to have told Beth exactly who was sick, and what was the matter, and all about it."

"I can't, for the life and soul of me, see what obligation she was under to say more than she chose," said Susan Blantyre.

"Well, now, no more can I, to tell you the honest truth; but people do say that her keeping all these things secret looks very suspicious."

"Suspicious of what, Miss Betty?"

"Oh, I don't know, indeed."

"Well, neither do they. I hope Erma Wolfsohn will be home soon. I must say I think it is very cowardly in people to try to injure a friendless young stranger like Erma," exclaimed Mrs. Blantyre, indignantly.

"So do I," agreed Miss Betty.

"Then set your own face against it, and instead of repeating the ill-natured things that 'people say,' just rebuke them for gossiping."

"Indeed, that would be the best way, and I will do it, though I never thought of it before," said Miss Betty, meekly.

"No, I dare say you did not," said the lady.

> "'More evil is wrought by want of thought
> Than ever by want of heart.'"

"I'll do as you say, Mrs. Blantyre. I will try my best to put down all evil speaking," said Miss Betty, as she arose to depart.

"Don't I know that you will, you good soul, now that your attention has been called to your duty?" responded Mrs. Blantyre, kissing the faded cheek of the spinster.

When, in due course of time, the evil news reached Gen. Bibb through his own two elder daughters, who went up to The Hill to dine with him one day, the veteran sat back in his chair and gave way to a loud, jolly, uproarious laugh.

"Well!" he exclaimed. "Let women alone for discovering mares' nests. But they wouldn't have their health if they had not some scandal to talk, I suppose. Now, it has been so many years since a girl ran away to be married, so many months since any man lost a heavy sum of money at cards so many weeks since any other man came home tipsy from Ice Cliff, that the gossips have been 'dying of a strange disease' because they had had no scandal to revive them. Now that pretty Mrs. Wolfsohn has gone to attend her grandfather's or somebody else's deathbed, they would like to make out that she has run away from her husband. She will return in a few days to put you all to the blush."

"Dear me, papa," exclaimed Miss Rose; "we have got nothing to do with it."

"No, indeed," added Miss Lily. "We only tell you what people say."

"'People'! 'People'! Who are the 'people'? Every one of you who keep the wicked ball of slander rolling! You are one of these 'people' every time you repeat these evil reports. Lily is another, every time she opens her mouth to the same effect," said the old soldier, severely.

"That is very hard of you, papa. I am sure we never

meant any harm. We do not say these things," said Miss Rose, with a much-injured air.

"No, indeed; nor have we any ill-will against Mrs. Wolfsohn," added Miss Lily.

"Well, then, do not continue to circulate the sayings of these pestilent gossips, if you do not wish to be classed with them. Rather show by your perfect silence how much you disapprove them. You should have acted on this principle without any suggestion from me. I should have thought my daughters were gentlewomen."

The two young ladies looked so abashed that their father changed the subject; but they did not forget the lesson.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE MYSTERIOUS GUESTS AT DARKWOOD.

> And so the marvel grew and grew;
> But who he was, or why he came,
> Or where his land, or what his name,
> None of the simple people knew. —ANON.

Two weeks passed away, and not a syllable was heard from the absent lady.

The gossip concerning her grew by what it fed on—conjecture.

The post office at Ice Cliff was kept in one corner of Mr. Aaron Nelson's grocery, feed and general merchandise store.

And there, letters for Mrs. Rodolph Wolfsohn accumulated by the dozen. They were all in the handwriting of her husband.

One day Septimus went to Ice Cliff to buy some tea and sugar for himself and Minty.

"Look here, old man, why haven't you been for your mail?" inquired the postmaster and grocer.

"Sar, you know my marster and mist'ess is bofe gone from home, and I wouldn't like to take de liberty ob fetchin' deir letters in deir absence, 'dout deir orders," meekly replied the old man.

"Of course, I know that your master has gone to Mexico with his company, and I heard that your mistress

was off somewhere, too. There are no letters here for your master, but near a couple of dozen for your mistress. Didn't she leave directions with anyone where they were to be sent?"

"No, sar, not wid anybody, far's I know. I—— Well, you see, sar, she went off in such a hurry she must 'a' forgot 'bout her letters."

"When is she coming back, then?"

"We 'spects her ebery day, sar," answered the old man, in more hope than confidence.

He then purchased and paid for his tea and sugar, and left the store.

This conversation occurred in the beginning of the third week of Erma's absence.

Before its close, a much greater marvel than anything that had yet occurred shook the quiet neighborhood to its center.

It was Friday evening.

It had been the custom ever since Bab Bibb had been enrolled among the pupils of Mrs. Somers' school at Blantyre House for the Fleetwood children to return with Bab to The Marsh on that evening, to stay over till Monday morning.

The manner of their travel was very unique. Miss Gunn did not approve of grooms in attendance upon young girls, so she always set her own confidential servant woman, Addie, mounted on one quiet old horse, and leading another to Blantyre House for the use of the children. The horse she rode was Charles, or, as she called it, "Chally"; the one she led was "Billy."

A queer procession the children made in moving from Blantyre House to The Marsh.

Bab Bibb sat on a pillion behind Addie, who led the march. Eustace and Fleurie both rode Billy—Eustace in the saddle, and Fleurie on the pillion behind him.

And so, riding double on both horses, the party proceeded to The Marsh.

Miss Gunn enjoyed company very much at her own house, and when grown people were not to be got, she took pleasure in the society of children.

On this fine Friday afternoon, late in September, Miss Barbra stood in the door of her own room in the old

house, shading her eyes with her hand from the setting sun while she looked off toward Wally's Bridge to catch the first sight of the grotesque procession of old nags and young children riding double.

"They're coming, Minnie! You may set the tea table. Put a plenty of damson preserves and some of that new honey on it," exclaimed Miss Gunn, as she dashed out in the yard, with flaring cap borders and flying strings to receive the visitors.

"Well, and how is Mrs. Blantyre, and Mrs. Somers, and are they coming to dine with me to-morrow?" she inquired, as the party rode up to the horse blocks, where Cousin Wally Lambe and Jehial, the coachman, stood, Mr. Lambe ready to help the children to alight, the servant prepared to lead the horses away.

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Gunn, mamma and Mrs. Somers are quite well. And, oh! such news!" exclaimed Fleurie, flushed and breathless.

"But are they coming to spend the day with me to-morrow, I ask you, Fleurie Fleetwood?" demanded Miss Barbra.

"Yes, indeed, Miss Gunn; and my dear Miss Erma—I mean Mrs. Wolfsohn—has come back!" blurted out Eustace.

"Eh? What? Rodolph Wolfsohn's wife come back at last!" exclaimed the old lady.

"Oh, yes, indeed, Aunt Barbra; and she has brought such a splendid young man with her!" added Bab.

"Brought such a—— W t in the dee's name are you talking about, Bab Bibb?" demanded Miss Gunn, bending severe brows upon her niece.

"It is a fact, Miss Barbra; she has brought an elegant young gentleman home with her," said Fleurie Fleetwood.

"What wretched stuff is this, girls? You ought to be ashamed of yourselves. You——"

"But it is so, Miss Gunn! And he's bully, I tell you!" concluded Master Eustace.

"Minnie, take all these children upstairs to get ready for tea. Jehial, lead the horses away. Addie, come in here to me; I want you!" said Miss Gunn, in a peremp-

tory tone that admitted of no hesitation on the part of her servants.

When the old lady found herself alone in her own room with Addie, she carefully closed all the doors, called the woman to her side, and said:

"Addie, what is all this rubbish the children are talking about? There can't be any truth in it?"

"I'se feared dere it, mist'ess," gravely replied the woman.

"What! Mrs. Wolfsohn returned home with a strange gentleman?"

"Yes, mist'ess."

"Who is he? What is his name? What is his business?" fiercely demanded Miss Gunn.

"Don't know, mist'ess, who he is, nor where he come from, nor what he wants, nor nuffin'. But Miss Erma Wolfsohn she come home yes'day evenin', I hears, and fotch dis gemman with her."

"The woman is raving mad! But perhaps he may be a near relation—even a brother, after all. I wonder no one thought of that," mused Miss Gunn.

"No, mist'ess, he ain't no brother," said Addie, with a sigh.

"How do you know, you——?" (A bad word.)

"'Cause I heard Miss Susan Blantyre, whose heart is nigh broke about it all, say as Miss Wolfsohn told her long ago as she had neither brother nor sister, but was herself her parents' onliest chile."

"Then we must wait for events—wait for events, as I said before. Who has seen Mrs. Wolfsohn or this man?"

"Oh, mist'ess, Miss Susan Blantyre herself saw 'em go by de Red Fox hack. Dr. Dutton he met 'em at de Red Fox itself when dey 'rived dere in de stagecoach, where he went to tend de landlord's wife."

"Did Mrs. Blantyre speak with them when she saw them go by?"

"Oh, no, mist'ess! Dey was too far off, as I understand. Miss Susan Blantyre was a-takin' of her evenin' ride on Margaret, de young mare what de Capt'n Blantyre bought for her last summer. And de sun had just set, and she was comin' home 'cross de country, when she see dem comin' along in de hack, and de windows was

open, and she saw deir faces, settin' side by side as dey was on de back seat; and he was a tall, portly, handsome young man, dressed in black clothes; and de carriage tuk de river road round toward Darkwood. But Miss Susan Blantyre she said she didn't think nuffin' out'n de way about it den, but only thought how he was some passenger as Miss Erma Wolfsohn had tuk up out'n kindness on de road, to put down at his own place where he mought be a-goin' to."

"Well, and so he might have been, for that matter! How often have I picked up men, women or children on the road and set them down at their own places? People are too eager to think evil, Addie."

"Yes, mist'ess, and so dey is! But, den, in dis case dere was Dr. Dutton what met 'em bofe at de Red Fox, and when he come to Blantyre House dis mornin' to see Miss Somers, which has got a touch of de ague, he ax Miss Susan Blantyre what gemman dat was what was come down to Darkwood along of Miss Erma Wolfsohn. 'Course Miss Susan Blantyre was s'prised enough, and she ax him what he meant. And den he telled her all about seein' of 'em light out of de stagecoach, and hire de hack on de spot, and, 'dout stoppin' for any 'freshments, or any conversation, get into de hack and drive off."

"Well! well! What of it all? How anxious some folks are to blacken that poor girl's name! I suppose it was just some traveler by the stagecoach, going to some place in this neighborhood, and, having no other conveyance, accepted a seat in Mrs. Wolfsohn's hack. A great mole hill to make a mountain of!"

"Oh, mist'ess, I wish it was!"

"What do you mean, you jade? Are you in league with the evil one to blast that lady's character?" fiercely demanded Miss Gunn.

"Who, me, mist'ess? Me blaze any young 'oman's corrector? Not me! Not Aderlion Mortimer, mist'ess!"

"Well, then, what do you mean, you ——? What is behind all this? What else? What else? I insist upon knowing!"

"Well, mist'ess, it ain't me as either says it, or does it, so don't blame me. But even while I was at Blantyre

House dis arternoon, a-waitin' for de chillun to get ready to come, old Uncle Septimus Nutt come from Darkwood to ax de loan of de chist of carpenter's tools, 'cause he was gwine to do some 'pairing on to de plantation—and Miss Susan Blantyre herself came inter de kitchen right before us all and say:

"'Uncle Sept, so your mist'ess has got home?'

"And Uncle Septimus Nutt say—he say:

"'Yes'm,' berry short.

"'And she has brought a gemman with her?' Miss Susan Blantyre, she ax.

"'Yes'm,' Uncle Sept say shorter dan ebber.

"'Who is dis gemman, Uncle Sept?' Miss Susan Blantyre, she ax.

"Den Uncle Septimus Nutt, he shake his ole gray head, slow and solemn, back'ard and for'ard, and he 'ply:

"'De Lors-a-minty knows, mist'ess; I don't.'

"And den when Miss Susan Blantyre would a 'quire more inter de subject, Uncle Sept, he shake his gray head ag'in, and he say:

"'Ax me no questions, my dear mist'ess, and I tell you no lies,' which meant, in course, as he didn't like to talk about dat stranger," said Addie, meaningly.

"How do you know what it meant, you impudent, forward ———? To talk of your betters so! How dare you?" wrathfully exclaimed Miss Gunn.

"Law, mist'ess, didn't you ax me about 'em your own self? And even call me in and shet de door to ax me?" said Addie, in a sobbing tone.

"Don't answer me back, you jade! Get out of my sight! And don't ever let me hear of your gossiping about your betters again! Begone!"

"Dat's allers de way wid Miss Barbra!" muttered Addie, as she slunk away to her own quarter, down by the edge of the wood. "She'll pump, and pump, and pump, till she hab pumped you dry, an' den she'll jest turn round all of a suddint an' snap your head off 'fore you know where you is. She ought to a been a man—she ought. Great, tall grannydear of an ole 'oman, allers a-tearin' about de plantation like de debbil in a gale o' wind, wid her ole cap-borders a-flarin' and de strings a-flyin'. 'Deed, sometimes I don't b'lieve as she's a 'oman

at all. I b'lieve she a big, ole horse marine of a land pirate."

Having relieved her pent-up feelings by this explosion, Addie entered her cabin, where Jehial, her husband, and their eleven children were waiting for their supper.

Miss Barbra Gunn walked up and down the floor of her own room in the old house, ruminating over what she had heard.

"And now they have got something to talk about. But I must put it down. I must put it down. And I will put it down. I won't stand by and see that young thing's character taken away by her best friends now, when her husband has gone to fight for his country, and she has got nobody to protect her. I'll protect her. And if I stand by her, I'd like to see who would dare to attack her! Humph! Not many, I suppose, if they had sense enough to know the difference between their lord, the king, and Tom Nigger!"

Miss Gunn walked her excitement off, and sat down in her broad flag chair to reflect coolly.

"But, I wonder who in the dee the fellow is, and what he is doing at Darkwood? Very imprudent in Rodolph Wolfsohn's wife to have any strange young man there with her in her husband's absence! Very imprudent, indeed, even if he is her own cousin—and she has no brother. Most imprudent, indeed, I must say! But I'll never admit even that much to other people. If I defend Rodolph Wolfsohn's wife, I'll do it to the bitter end!"

A light tap at the door disturbed Miss Gunn's cogitations.

"Well, who in the dee is that?" she exclaimed.

"Me, Aunt Barbra. The——"

"What do you want, Bab?"

"The tea is all ready, and we are waiting for you," replied Miss Brabra's youngest niece.

Miss Gunn flung herself up out of her chair, and tore open the door, exclaiming:

"I declare to mankind that I cannot go a moment apart to say my prayers but what some imp comes roaring after me! Go along, then, and have the tea put on the table! I am coming now. Oh! I'll give it to Susan Biantyre and old Dutton and the whole boiling of them, if they say one

word against Rodolph Wolfsohn's wife in my hearing! I'll make everyone of 'em wish they had fallen into the hands of the Old Scratch, instead of mine! Ah-h-h!" she snorted, as the war horse snorts who sniffs the battle afar off.

And she smoothed down her rumpled cap frills and went into the back room, behind her own, where the family took their meals when there was no company—grown-up company, of course, for Miss Gunn did not consider the Fleetwood children as guests.

Miss Barbra took her seat before her tea tray.

There were seven at the table. Miss Barbra sat at the head, Mr. Wally Lambe at the foot, Miss Rose and Miss Lily on the right side, and the three children on the left.

Miss Gunn asked the blessing, and then, with her hand on the handle of the teapot, she looked down the table, fixed her eyes on the man at the foot, and exclaimed, in a voice of authority:

"Walter Lambe!"

Poor Cousin Wally started as if he had been suddenly struck, brought himself up to "attention," and met the stern eyes of his benefactress.

"Walter Lambe!" she cried again.

"Yes, Cousin Barbra!" he answered, slightly trembling, for he was a weak little gentleman, and his formidable cousin was a terrible woman, and he did not know what was coming next.

"Walter Lambe, listen to me!"

"Yes, Cousin Barbra."

"Mind every word I say to you now!"

"Yes, Cousin Barbra."

"If—you—hear—any—man—— Are you listening to me?"

"Yes, Cousin Barbra."

"Well, then, why don't you hold up your head and look me straight in the face?"

It was a severe ordeal, but poor Cousin Wally went through with it.

"Now, then! If ever you hear any man breathe one hint against the good name of Rodolph Wolfsohn's wife —knock him down!"

"Ye-ye-yes, Cousin Barbra," replied the poor little gentleman, falling into a tremor.

"On the spot—do you hear?"

"Ye-ye-yes, Cousin Barbra."

"And then thrash him within an inch of his life! Do that!"

"Ye-ye-yes, Cousin Barbra; if I can."

"If you 'can,' you little beast! What do you mean by that?"

"The man might be twice as big and strong as I am," pleaded the poor gentleman.

"Well, then, get yourself killed in a good cause! Nobody'd miss you! It would be a very honorable end for you to come to at last."

"But—I don't want to die, Cousin Barbra."

"Walter Lambe! if you are a coward, you are the first one that ever appeared in our family. Whether you like it or no, you are bound to stand up for Rodolph Wolfsohn's wife. Rodolph Wolfsohn's mother was my schoolmate. I am your fourth cousin, so that makes you the nearest male relation to Erma Wolfsohn, and the man above all others who is bound to defend her honor. Yes! And, if necessary, you will have to go to Darkwood, and take that tall, black-bearded fellow and pitch him neck and heels out of the window. It will be your bounden duty as a Lambe and a gentleman."

"I—I—don't think I understand them high points of honor, Cousin Barbra," said the little man, deprecatingly.

"You don't understand—you—you—— Do you mean to tell me that you won't do this!" exclaimed Miss Gunn, starting up.

"I—I—I'll do the best I can, Cousin Barbra! I will, indeed!" said Cousin Wally, heartily.

"Well, then, see that you do," answered Miss Gunn, subsiding into her chair.

"Aunt Barbra, the tea's getting cold," said little Bab, impatiently.

Miss Gunn's temper was hot, so she did not care.

But she now poured out the cups of tea, which Minnie, who was waiting with a little salver at her right hand, received and dispensed to those around the table, while

Cousin Wally, with still trembling hands, sliced and served the cold ham, and handed the biscuits and butter.

When tea was over the whole party gathered in Miss Barbra's room, around a bright little wood fire, and occupied themselves with knitting, sewing and desultory conversation until ten o'clock, when they separated and retired—all sleeping in the old house—Miss Barbra Gunn in her own room, Miss Rose and Miss Lily in the room above this, Fleurie Fleetwood and Bab Bibb in the little chamber over the back room, and Eustace in the loft with Cousin Wally.

The children always greatly enjoyed these visits to The Marsh, and even took delight in the much more crowded and rougher accommodations than they possessed at home in Blantyre House.

They were up early the next morning—the beginning of a brilliant, late September day.

They watched the road over Wally's Bridge and the short causeway across the guagmire, for the earliest sight of the Blantyre carriage.

It appeared about ten o'clock, and Miss Barbra, in her best cap and her black silk gown, stood in the door of the new house to receive the two ladies.

She kept her "fire" in reserve for the first mention of Erma Wolfsohn's name.

She herself conducted her guests to a bedroom, where they laid off their bonnets. But no word was said of Erma.

They all went down into the parlor and talked of everything else, and of everybody else, but Mrs. Wolfsohn.

Miss Gunn watched all day for that subject, but it was not broached.

At the well-spread dinner table they talked of the war, the weather and the crops, but not of Erma Wolfsohn. Hours later, at the social tea table, they talked of dress, fashion, parisn affairs—not a word of Mrs. Wolfsohn.

It was not until the two ladies were taking their leave that Miss Gunn herself broached the subject.

"What is all this I hear about Rodolph Wolfsohn's wife?"

"Dear Miss Gunn," said Mrs. Blantyre, "we know

nothing, and would rather say nothing. I dare say it is all right."

But who was the strange guest?

CHAPTER XXIII.

A NINE DAYS' WONDER.

None e'er saw her blush,
Or change her countenance for this report;
A heart unspotted is not easily daunted.
The purest spring is not so free from soil
As she is clear from evil.—SHAKESPEARE.

It was the evening of the same day on which Erma Wolfsohn had been seen by several parties, on her way home, accompanied by one whom they were pleased to designate as a suspicious-looking stranger.

The sun had set, but the afterglow of a warm twilight was shining on river, field and woods in their rich autumnal hues.

Within the spacious kitchen at Darkwood, all was comfortable and cheery.

Old Minty, having finished her household work, sat before the ample, open fireplace, watching her teakettle as it hung swinging over the blaze, and her Johnny-cake as it baked slowly before the coals.

A square, oak table, covered with a clean crash cloth, was set for two people, and provided with a cold leg of pork and a plate of pickled cucumbers.

Old Minty had a habit of talking to herself, which she had acquired in the solitude of her life.

She was mumbling over her cares and troubles even now, as she sat in the warmth and light of the blazing wood fire.

"Not to write to none of us! Not to send no messidge to we dem colored people! 'Bove all, not to come home, when she said she would, in two weeks!

"She been gone free weeks last Tuesday mornin', and now it's goin' on four weeks she's away, and nigh de first ob October!

"People ax me whar she gone, and how long she gwine stay, an' when she comin' back, till my po' ole black face

get as hot as if I was bakin' cake ober de fire on Fourth o' July!

"Not as I blames de po' young thing, nor likewise 'spicions her de least bit in de world! No, indeed; but evil-minded people does, an' my mind is troubled an' anxious 'bout her! Somefin's wrong! Somefin's berry wrong, I kno'."

Such was the burden of old Minty's self-communion, while she sat before the fire, watching and turning her Johnny-cake.

She was interrupted, at length, by the entrance of old Septimus, her fellow servant, who closed the door behind him, took his pipe from the mantelpiece, filled and lighted it, and sat down in an old chair in the chimney corner to smoke at his leisure.

"You's late, ole man," remarked Aunt Minty.

"Yes, honey; I was seein' to fings outside, 'parin' for dis sudden change in de wedder! Dere's gwine to be a hard frost to-night, now I tell yer," replied old Septimus, as he removed his pipe for a moment and stuffed his tough, black forefinger down in the glowing bowl to pack the burning tobacco closer.

"Yes, it's chilly. I been hoberin' ober de fire all de ebenin'," said Minty, shivering.

"Has yer, chile? Well, we's gettin' ole—you an' me—an' naterally we's gettin' chilly."

"'Gettin' ole,' ole man? I fink we's done got ole, long ago."

"Dat's so, chile; but de later de night, de nearer de mornin'; an' de later de winter, de nearer de spring; an' de oler de man an' de 'oman, de nearer to de new life. I'm satisfied, Sister Minty."

"So am I, Brudder Septimus. But please to tell me, brudder, ober again wat dat pos'marster said to you dis mornin' when you went arter de molasses."

"Oh, I'll tell yer wen I come back, chile. I ain't got time now; I got to go to put some wood on de parlor fire, an' de dinin' room an' bedroom fires," the old man exclaimed, as he arose and laid his pipe on the mantelpiece.

"De idee ob keepin' fires up all de time, a-lookin' for

dem wot nebber comes back, nor nebber writes, nor eben sen's no messidge!" sighed Minty.

"It do look like lost labor, as I hab been doin' for de las' week or mo', but den, dough she don't come yet, she might drap down right on top of us, any minute," said Septimus.

"Yes, so she might; an', 'sides which, de fires do make de house look mo' cheerful-like," replied Minty.

"So dey do," admitted the old man, as he left the kitchen.

Minty took off the kettle of boiling water, made the tea, and set it to drawing, took up her johnny-cake, cut it in slices, and put it between two hot plates to keep warm on the hearth, and then sat down again to wait.

In a short time Septimus returned, and then she put the tea and johnny-cake on the table, and they sat down to supper.

"Now, ole man, tell me wot de pos'marster said to yer dis mornin'," said Minty, as she handed him a steaming bowl of tea.

"Wait—till I done—eatin', chile. I nebber could talk an' eat at de same time" replied Septimus, with his mouth full of pork and johnny-cake.

"Berry well, Brudder Septimus," said Minty, meekly; and thenceforward she kept silence until the end of the meal, when the old man arose, refilled his pipe, lighted it, and sat down in the chimney corner to smoke.

"Now, will yer tell me wot de pos'marster say 'bout our young mist'ess gwine away, an' stayin' 'way so long?" inquired Minty.

"Wait—till I done—smokin' my pipe. I nebber could smoke an' talk at de same time," replied Septimus, puffing away between every few words.

"Berry well, brudder," again meekly responded Minty, beginning to wash up her tea things, to put them away.

By the time she had made the kitchen tidy, and sat down at the fire with her knitting, her old fellow servant had finished his pipe, and laid it upon the shelf. So, without waiting to be asked again, or even asking Minty to wait, he cleared his throat, and began:

"Pos'marster mos' break my po' ole heart wid his questions, axin' me wot took my mist'ess away so onexpected;

how long she was gwine to stay—w'en we looked for her back, an' sich like. An' me a-stan'in' afore him like an idiwut 'dout bein' able to say nuffin' but, ' 'Deed I dunno, sir,' to eberything. Tell you 'twas mortifyin'!"

"An' wot else did he say, Brudder Sept?"

"Oh! he tell me dere was her box cho'k full o' letters, two or t'ree times ober, an' how he had to take 'em out an' put 'em into a empty tea chist an' set 'em up on de highest shelf ob his store to keep 'em safe."

"Ah! Lor' a me! I wish she would come home. 'Deed I wish she had nebber goed away," sighed Aunt Minty.

"Hush, honey! I hear wheels," said Uncle Septimus.

"No, yer don't. It's yer 'magination, Sept."

"Listen, den. Now!" exclaimed the old man, as the sound of horses' hoofs and carriage wheels rattled and grated on the rough road that led up to the house front and stopped there.

"Sure nuff! Run, Brudder Sept, an' open de front door!" exclaimed Aunt Minty, as a thundering knock sounded on the iron knocker.

"I shouldn't wonder if it was her herself, as, o' course, it mus' be, for who else would come at dis hour ob de night?" cried the old man, as he hastily seized a tallow candle that stood in an iron candlestick on the mantelpiece, lighted it, and left the kitchen.

The peremptory knock was impatiently repeated as he hurried to the front door, drew the bolts and bars, and unlocked and opened it.

The driver of the Red Fox hack stood there, already growling.

"Is yer gwine to keep your mist'ess an' de ge'man stan'-in' out here in de cole all night, Brudder Septimus?"

"No, Brudder Simms. I come as fast as ebber I could, an' faster, too!" answered the old man, gently pushing the driver aside to make way for the lady who had just left the hack, and was coming toward the house, followed by a tall, distinguished-looking man.

"How do you do, Septimus? Is all well with you?" inquired the sweet voice of Erma, as she stepped upon the threshold.

"Yes, mist'ess, all is well, an' mighty glad to see yer, young mist'ess, an' de fires is all a-burnin' lively, an'

Minty settin' up waitin' for yer, as has been de case dese eight or nine days past, since we has been lookin' for yer back."

"Ah! you have taken a great deal of needless trouble, and I thank you both, but I am sorry, Septimus," said the lady, gently.

"We don't mind de trouble, mist'ess. Nebber mind dat, so's yer's back safe, t'ank de Lord."

"I suppose there are a great many letters waiting for me here, Septimus?"

"Yes, mist'ess; dere's piles and piles."

"Bring them to me in the parlor immediately."

"But, my dear mist'ess, dey's in de pos'-office."

"'In the post office'? Why have you left them there?" demanded the lady, with a look of disappointment.

"My dear mist'ess, I couldn't 'sume to take dem out in your absence 'dout your orders."

"I am sorry for that; but, of course, you acted for the best. You must go for them early to-morrow."

"I'll be sure to do so, mist'ess."

As they talked, Erma had passed into the hall, followed by the handsome stranger.

"There is a fire in the parlor, you say, Septimus?" she inquired.

"Yes, mist'ess; kept up day and night since ebber we 'spected of yer home," replied the man, opening the door on the right to admit the travelers into the same sitting room into which Erma herself had been introduced on her first arrival as a bride at Darkwood, the room upholstered in faded yellow moreen, and having the old-fashioned center table in the middle, covered with equally old-fashioned annuals and illustrated books and faded daguerreotypes in morocco cases.

"Sit down here and rest," said Erma, in low tones, addressed to the stranger, as she drew a large easy-chair toward the blazing wood fire.

"He's her brudder, or somefin," said old Septimus, to himself.

The distinguished-looking stranger sank silently into the offered seat.

Old Septimus, from the tallow candle in his own hand, lighted the wax candles on the mantelpiece, and the astral

lamp that stood on the center table, and then turned to look at the stranger again.

Certainly, the distinction of his appearance was not due to his habiliments. He was clothed in the coarsest "pepper-and-salt" cassinet cloth, such as the winter wear of the plantation negroes was made of. His linen was also coarse, and the hat that he set down beside his chair was but a rough-and-ready broad-brimmed straw one.

It was his face and head, his air and gait, to which "distinction" appertained.

His features were of the high, Roman type, with the lofty brow, eagle eye, aquiline nose, short upper lip, perfectly molded mouth and rounded-up protruding chin. This could be seen or guessed even under his beard, for his dark, fine face was framed in with long, black, silky, curling hair and beard. In this particular he bore some superficial resemblance to the absent master of the house; but, then, the stranger's hair was pure black, while that of Rodolph Wolfsohn had red lights in the sunshine.

"Septimus," said Mrs. Wolfsohn, "go and call Minty to attend me, and do you also come back to show this—this man to the furnished room in the attic, and there attend to his wants. He is Mr. Aleyn, our new overseer, and he will remain in the house and take his meals at my table until the overseer's cottage can be made ready for him," concluded the lady, as she stood, somewhat embarrassed, even in speaking to her simple and respectful old servant, and pulling and tugging at her tight glove in getting it off, as if to cover her confusion.

"Berry well, mist'ess," said the old man, going out to do her errand.

No sooner had the old man left the room than—with the curiosity of a child unconscious of wrongdoing—he knelt softly upon the floor and peeped through the keyhole. That small opening commanded the range before the fireplace and the stranger sitting there.

This was what old Septimus saw:

Erma Wolfsohn came forward, stood for a moment in front of the stranger, and then sank on her knees at his feet and took both his hands and pressed them to her lips and to her heart, while her tears fell fast upon them, and her voice murmured, brokenly:

"Welcome! Welcome! Oh, the happiness of having you here with me!"

A change had come over the stranger, too. His erect form seemed suddenly to have collapsed, his stately head dropped on his chest, his shoulders curved and bowed, his hands trembled, and his voice faltered as he said:

"But, Erma, my safety may be your destruction; my asylum your grave."

"No! no! no! no! Long suffering has disturbed your clear judgment. I run no risks. And if I did, what of that? This is your ark of salvation, your haven of rest. Here you may abide unquestioned, unsuspected. I was diretced by my husband to procure an overseer to look after the plantation in his absence. I have found one to suit me. That is all the world need know. You will be safe. Oh! my dearest, dearest——"

Old Septimus, absorbed as he was in listening, heard no more, for, at that instant, a groping hand found his woolly head in the dark, and a quavering voice exclaimed:

"Why, Sept, old man, I like to a-stumbled ober yer. Wot's yer doin' here, settin' down a-rubbin' yer rheumatizy shins on de mist'ess doormat?"

"I—I was comin' arter you, Sister Minty. De mist'ess calls for yer," said old Sept, in a great fright at having been caught by the unsuspicious old Minty.

He recovered his self-possession, however, and rapped at the door.

"Enter," murmured the soft voice of the lady, from within.

They opened the door and went in.

Erma was standing with her hand on the corner of the mantelpiece, and the stranger was sitting in the armchair, no longer collapsed and bowed, but erect and self-possessed.

"Now, Septimus, take one of these candles and light Mr. Aleyn to his room; supply him with all that he needs, and kindle a fire, if he wishes one. And you, Minty, come with me to my chamber," said Mrs. Wolfsohn, as she took one of the candles from the mantelpiece and put it in the hand of her woman.

The two servants obeyed these directions, and the whole party left the room.

Septimus, conducting the stranger, led the way up the first flight of stairs, and thence up into the attic.

Erma, attended by Minty, followed them as far as the first floor, and then turned aside to her own well-warmed and well-lighted chamber, whose blazing wood fire illumined the whole room with the brilliancy of a dozen chandeliers.

"You'll find eberyfing here, mist'ess, ready for yer, as I hab kept it so ebber since we begun to look for yer home," said Minty, as she drew forward the big armchair for her mistress' accommodation.

"And the water in the ewers, Minty? How long has it been standing here?" inquired the lady, lifting one of the tall, blue china pitchers and looking into it.

"Only dis ebenin', my mist'ess. I hab changed de water in de jugs ebery ebenin' since we been lookin' for yer home."

"Then I have all I want. And you, Minty, may go and get some supper ready for me and—and the overseer. Do not be long, but get the best you can in the shortest space of time," said Mrs. Wolfsohn, dismissing her attendant.

"And she nebber ax me how nobody was, nor how fings was goin' on, nor nuffin' wot any lady would want to kno' arter being away so long," said old Minty to her fellow servant, whom she encountered on the stairs, as she went down.

"Nor likewise didn't he talk much, nor want no waitin' on, but sent me right out'n de room soon's ebber he foun' out he had f'esh water and clean towels nuff for his wash," added Septimus.

"Tell yer wot, old man, mist'ess has got somefin' on her mine," said Minty, with a sigh.

"I kno' she has," added Septimus, significantly.

"What does yer kno', Brudder Septimus?" inquired Minty, as they reached the kitchen.

"Me! I don't kno' nuffin special. I on'y kno' as mist'ess hab got somefin' on her mine! Dat's all! I mustn't tell wot I seen wid my own eyes, 'cause I's feared dat sight wasn't got fair, an' so I mus' hole my tongue about dat," added the old man to himself.

"Come, now, Sept! Fly 'round, ole man, and help me to get supper," said Minty.

"Yes. What mus' I do?"

"Slice some new ham thin for me to grill. Den go set de table while I grills it, an' poaches de eggs, an' toases de bread."

Sept took a plate and a carving knife from the dresser, reached down the bunch of keys from their peg and went out to the storeroom.

While these preparations for supper were going on in the kitchen, Erma Wolfsohn made a hasty toilet and came out of her room and stood at the foot of the stairs waiting for the stranger to descend.

He came at length with feeble steps and stooping figure, at strange variance with his free movements and upright form when first we saw him, scarcely half an hour before.

"Come down with me to the parlor. Lean on my arm. Are you very weary to-night?" said Erma, with reverential tenderness, as she offered him her hand.

"No, no, dear! Only a little, from the long ride; supper and a night's rest will restore me," he answered, as he came down the last of the attic steps; and, laying his hand, not within her offered arm, for he was too tall for that, but on her shoulder, for support, he passed, with her, along the upper hall and down the stairs to the parlor, where she made him sit down in the large easy-chair, on one side of the cheerful fire.

She drew a chair to the opposite side and seated herself.

Between them, but a little farther back, stood the old-fashioned center table, lighted by its astral lamp and covered with time-worn annuals, illustrated books and daguerreotypes.

Erma, observing the paleness of her guest's face and the languor of his manner, that he did not exert himself to conceal, now that no other eye than hers was upon him, arose and went to the cupboard on the right of the fireplace and took up a decanter of old port wine, which had stood there undisturbed ever since she had first come to the house, poured out a glassful and turned to offer it to her guest, when a startled cry from the latter suddenly arrested her actions.

He held an open daguerreotype case in his hand and was gazing at the pictured features there, with ashen

face and starting eyes, full of terror, agony and deep remorse.

"Oh, I never thought of that!" moaned Erma, as she staggered back for a moment.

Then, recovering herself, she went up to him and gently took the case from his hand.

"Where—where did that come from?" inquired Aleyn, in an expiring voice, as he sank, half fainting, back in his chair.

"I—I do not know. It has been here ever since I first came to the house," replied Erma, speaking the literal truth; for, of course, she did not know at what gallery or in what city the picture had been taken; yet, nevertheless, she felt guilty of evasion.

"Do not prevaricate with me, Erma," said the stranger, in a mournfully reproachful voice. "How came this picture here?"

"Indeed, I do not know," replied the young lady, with equal truth—for, certainly, she was ignorant as to the person who had brought the picture to Darkwood—and with equal compunction for a real or fancied evasion of the question.

"Erma! was this—man—your husband's friend? Answer me that," he said, speaking with difficulty, and, in the first words, with a choking voice.

"No, indeed, he was no friend of my husband's. That, at least, I can tell you," said the girl, with more promptness and assurance than she had yet spoken.

"Then accident, caprice or the devil has thrown it in my way! Lock it up, Erma. Hide it. Let me never look upon it again," he said, in growing excitement.

"You never shall," replied the lady; and taking the tongs, she made a pit in the hottest depths of the glowing hickory coals and dropped the daguerreotype of Gustave Perlemonte in the midst and covered it with fire.

A low laugh, full of pain and mockery, not of mirth or triumph, issued from the pallid lips of the stranger.

"Take this glass of wine; it will restore you," said Erma, taking up the stimulant and pressing it upon him.

He received it with a trembling hand and sipped it slowly and with some difficulty in swallowing. When he

had emptied the glass, he put it down on the table, and, turning to his companion, said:

"Erma, you may wonder at having seen me so moved by the sight of that old daguerreotype; but if you knew whom it was like—yes, as much like as if he had sat for it—you would wonder no longer. Erma, you never saw —Gustave Perlemonte—but this stranger's daguerreotype was the exact image of—Gustave Perlemonte."

And every time he uttered that name it was with hesitation, and then a gasp, as if the ordeal was too much for his nerve.

"Think no more about it, sir. Oh! think no more about it. You never intended to——"

A rap at the door interrupted Erma's words.

Old Septimus had come to announce supper.

The young hostess arose and invited her guest to follow her to the dining room.

Aunt Minty had done her best, under the circumstances, and had set before her mistress and the stranger an appetizing supper of fragrant tea and coffee, fresh milk and butter, biscuits and rice cakes, grilled ham, poached eggs and cake and preserves.

But, to Aunt Minty's disappointment and Uncle Sept's disgust, neither Erma nor her visitor did full justice to the good things. A cup of tea and a bit of biscuit formed Erma's meal; a cup of coffee, a poached egg and a rice cake the stranger's.

CHAPTER XXIV.

DEVOTION.

Thought ye, your iron hands of pride
Could break the knot that nature tied?
No! Let the eagle change his plume,
The leaf its hue, the flower its bloom;
But ties around the heart are spun,
That could not, would not, be undone!

—CAMPBELL.

Almost immediately after supper, the guest, making his apology to the hostess, retired to his attic chamber.

Then Erma called old Septimus to her presence, and said:

"You tell me that you have never brought any letters home from the post office since I went away?"

"Yes, young mist'ess, I tole yer so. I ain't fotch no letters home f'om de pos' office, 'cause I wouldn't 'sume to do sich a fing 'dout yer orders, an' yer nebber gib me no orders to dat defec'," answered the old man.

"I never thought of it, in the suddenness and confusion of my departure. Now I am paying the penalty of my thoughtlessness, in having to wait until to-morrow before I can get my letters from friends of whom I have not heard for more than three weeks," exclaimed Erma, speaking out her "grief" and her "impatience," and to herself, rather than to the old servant.

But he replied, in a consoling tone:

"Well, mist'ess, I'll rise up 'fore day to-morrow mornin', so's to get to Ice Cliff by de time de pos' office is open, an' soon's ebber I get de letters I'll ride home fas' as ole Henry can trabel. An' I tell yer, my young mist'ess, yer'll get a pile. Dey hab been 'cumulatin' to dat destent de pos'marster had to take 'em out'n de letter box an' pack 'em away in an ole tea chist on de top shelf ob his shop. Yer shall hab yer letters on de table wid yer coffee and muffins when yer come downstairs to-morrow mornin'."

"Thank you, Uncle Sept. And now, as you will have to rise so early, you had better retire at once. Good-night."

"Good-night, my dear young mist'ess," said the old man, bowing low.

Erma left the room.

Old Septimus watched her ascend the stairs, and then shook his gray head portentously, murmuring:

"It's berry 'sterious! Berry 'sterious, indeed! Oh! I hopes my dear young mist'ess won't come to no harm! I wonder wot it do mean? I reckon I do kno'! Dis man is some poor 'lation ob her own, wot ain't got no money, nor no bizness, an' so she takes him in here to work for his libin', an' she 'shamed to let on as he's her own born, blood 'lation! Dat's it! Dat's it! I jes' ought to a knowed it 'fore! An' now I has foun' it out, 'doubt her consent; I'll nebber tell nobody, not eben Minty! Dere! He's mist'ess' 'lation! But, oh! won't she hab to be

mighty particular an' not make much of him, even if he is her 'lation? 'Cause, if she does, oh! won't de ole wimmin talk! Mist'ess will jes' hab to keep her 'lation in his place as de oberseer, an' no mo' nor less; or else she'll hab to own up as he is her 'lation, an' wot sort ob a 'lation, too, to 'count for her making so much ob him! I wish somebody would 'vise dat young gal, wot ain't no mudder nor farder to do it, an' her husban' gone to de big wars! 'Deed, I feels like prayin' for one in minimint purril! I does! An' de 'spicions ob de people is decited by her goin' 'way so strange a'ready! 'Deed, nex' love feas' I gwine to ax de brudderin to pray for de soul ob one in minimint purril! I needn't name no names."

So resolving, Uncle Septimus proceeded to close up the house, cover up the fires, and put out the lights.

After which he went to bed and to sleep.

In the meantime, Erma had gone up to her own chamber, where she found a good fire burning and old Minty in attendance.

"Well, aunty," said Erma, as she dropped wearily into the large armchair, "I wish you to tell me how all our neighbors are, and what has happened since I have been gone."

Poor Erma asked this for the sake of finding out indirectly, if she could, what construction the little community had put upon her sudden and unexplained departure. She was morbidly anxious upon this point, and we must not criticise her conduct in questioning her own servant. Old Aunt Minty, the humble negro woman, was much more worthy of her confidence than many a well-born lady or gentleman would have been.

"Well, my mist'ess——" began the old woman.

"Sit down, Minty. Draw up that little flag-bottom chair, and make yourself comfortable. You are too old and too weary with your day's work to stand while you answer me."

"T'anky, my mist'ess. You's berry 'siderate ob ole people, dough I hardly fink it is proper fur me to sit in your presence, an' wouldn't do it if I wa'n't jes' ready to drap," said the woman, with a pathetic, deprecating smile as she took the permitted seat.

"How are the Blantyres, Aunt Minty?"

"Yes, mist'ess, dey's all well, I hear, an' de fambly school is flourishin', dough dey do seem to hab a great deal o' trouble wid poor, misfortunate Miss Bab Bibb. But what can dey 'spect ob dat poor, moderless baby, fotch up as she is? Miss Susan Blantyre say how she mean to keep her in de school, dough, an' do de bes' she can by her."

"Mrs. Blantyre is so truly good! And talking of Bab Bibb—how are all the family at The Marsh?"

"He! he! he!—He! he! he!" laughed old Minty, in a soft, low, deprecating way.

"Why, what amuses you, aunty?" inquired her mistress, with an indulgent smile.

"Oh! my mist'ess! 'Tain't many fings as can 'muse me at my time o' life; but dis yer is too funny!"

"What is it, Aunt Minty?"

"Why, yer know Miss Adder Mesh?"

"Certainly. What of her?"

"Well, de 'port is, dat Mr. Walter Lambe, from de Ma'sh, is payin' his distressful detentions to Miss Mesh, at Brighthome. He! he! he!"

"Mr. Lambe paying attention to Miss Mesh!" exclaimed Erma, in surprise.

"Such is de 'port, mist'ess."

"Cousin Wally courting Ada Mesh? Oh, never!"

"But such is de 'port, mist'ess. An' Brudder Sept say, yer ought to a-seen Miss Barbra Gunn's face when she fus' heerd it. Uncle Sept was at de Ma'sh when de news fus' come. Uncle Jug, from Brighthome, fus' brought it —tells Miss Barbra how Mr. Walter Lambe was dere two or t'ree times a week a-courtin' Miss Mesh. And Miss Gunn went off into such a passion dat she had one ob her ole turns—heart beatin' in de back ob her head, you know, mist'ess—which must be a drefful fing."

"I should think so."

"An' had to set right down in de chair an' be bled a quart 'fore she got ober it," concluded old Minty.

And still Erma had not heard what she wished most to hear—what construction her neighbors put upon her conduct.

"Mr. Clement Gladden and his family are well, I hope?"

"Oh, yes, mist'ess; berry well."

"I wonder what he thinks of Cousin Wally Lambe's courtship," said Erma, with a slight smile, and speaking more to herself than to her companion.

"Oh! He? He 'courages ob it, wid all his heart. Laws, mist'ess, eberbody knows ole Marse Clement Gladden's good heart. He 'courages ob 'em. Leastways, so Uncle Jug 'ports."

"But to what end? They cannot marry. Neither of them has a dollar to live on."

"Dat's wot Brudder Sept say Miss Barbra Gunn say w'en she first hear it. She say:

" 'Wally Lambe, what hab you got to s'port a family?'

"An' Marse Wally he couldn't say nuffin. An' den she ax him:

" 'How you 'spects to get along?'

"Den Marse Wally Lambe he plucks up a little courage an' he answer her back ag'in:

" 'I 'spects, ef as how I marries ob de lubly Miss Mesh, we can get along like udder people do.' "

Erma forgot her troubles in a hearty laugh at this characteristic speech of the simple, unthinking and improvident Cousin Wally. He was quite capable of marrying Miss Mesh, if she would have him, under such circumstances—without knowing where or how they would live, even for the first week of their honeymoon.

"Well, my mist'ess, dat 'get along like udder people do,' 'dout a cent ob money to start wid, was wot gib Miss Barbra her ill turn, and started her heart up to beatin' in de back ob her head, so she had to set right down an' be bled a quart. An', 'deed, my dear mist'ess, we must 'fess, as it would a made de most ob us commit sin, to hear a man like ole Mr. Wally talk dat way 'bout gettin' married on nuffin! 'Get along like udder people,' indeed," repeated the old woman.

And still Erma heard not what she longed most to hear —what her neighbors said of her.

Indeed, old Minty was not likely to have repeated anything that would have given her beloved young mistress pain.

Erma asked no more questions, but changed the conversation by saying:

"I wish to call your attention to our new overseer, Aunt Minty."

"Yes, mist'ess."

"He is not a common man."

"I seed dat, mist'ess, f'om de fust."

"He is a gentleman in reduced circumstances."

Minty looked puzzled. She did not quite understand what was meant by "reduced circumstances."

"He has come to poverty," amended Erma.

"Yes, mist'ess; so I 'sposed, or he wouldn't come down to be an oberseer," replied the old woman, respectfully.

"But he will not make a worse overseer on that account, I hope, but rather a better one, indeed."

"Yes, mist'ess; but it 'pends on wot fotch him down to poverty. Ef drink, or gamblin', or de like, had any hand in it, I wouldn't ree-commend him, my dear young mist'ess."

"He is sober and honest, I hear. Of course, I should not have taken any dissipated man, even if he was a reduced gentleman, as an overseer."

"O' course not, my mist'ess."

"What I wish to say to you, Minty, is, that as the new overseer happens to be a gentleman, I wish to have him treated with the respect due to his position."

"Ob course, mist'ess. Yer needn't be doubtful in yer mine 'bout dat, young mist'ess. A real gemman, like dis gemman, allers 'ceives 'spect f'om us colored people, no matter how po' an' lone he is."

"I know it," said Erma, softly. "And now, Aunt Minty, go to bed and take your rest. You need it."

"Can't I do nuffin else for you, young mist'ess? Help you to undress, nor nuffin?"

"No, I thank you, Aunt Minty. Your forethought has done every possible thing for me already. Good-night."

So Erma dismissed her old servant.

She listened until she heard the retreating footsteps of the old woman die away in the distant back passages below stairs. When all was silent she arose and left her room, went softly up the attic stairs, paused before the door of her mysterious guest, and knelt down and held her breath to catch any movement from within. Pres-

ently her acute ears caught the sound of the regular breathing of the tenant within the chamber.

"He sleeps—he sleeps! Thank fortune, he sleeps well!" she murmured to herself, as she softly arose to her feet and silently stole away.

She returned to her own room and retired to bed, where, fatigued by a long week's journey, she, too, soon fell asleep.

Erma slept long and deeply. She did not awake until she was aroused by a low rapping at her door.

"Who is it? And what is wanted?" she inquired, still half asleep.

"It is me, mist'ess—Minty. It is late, mist'ess, nine o'clock; and Uncle Sept has come back from de pos' office, and I has fotch yer letters up to yer."

Erma sprang out of bed quickly enough, and wide awake now.

"Give them to me!" she eagerly exclaimed, opening the door.

Old Minty handed the crowded mail bag to her mistress and then came into the room, knelt down on the hearth, and began to kindle up the fire, which had nearly burned out, and to replenish it with wood from a box in the corner.

Meanwhile, Erma threw herself into the large easy-chair, unlocked the bag and emptied its contents upon the table at her side.

There were some newspapers, and more than a dozen letters.

All these latter were from her husband, and had been written daily from every stopping place along the line of march.

Erma hurriedly looked over the dates in the postmarks on the backs of the letters and seized upon the letter with latest date to open first, that she might have the latest news of her husband at once.

The other letters, she thought, she could afterward read at her leisure.

This was dated at St. Louis, and informed her that the march had been too rapid to allow him to wait in any place long enough to receive a letter from her; that, consequently, though he had written many to her, he had

had none from her since that one written on the evening of the day of his departure, describing the company of neighbors that had come in to comfort her for his absence, which had reached him at Washington.

He then requested her to direct her next letter to Fort Leavenworth, where the regiment would remain for a week or more. He concluded with the most earnest entreaties that she would take care of her precious health and keep up her spirits, and with assurance of everlasting affection.

Over and over Erma read this letter, almost forgetful of the guest who had interested her so much.

"I could not write to Rodolph during my absence, because I could not explain my absence. How fortunate, then, that his march was so rapid, after leaving Washington, that he did not even expect to get one from me!" she mused.

Then, suddenly remembering her guest, she said:

"Has Mr. Aleyn come down yet?"

"No, mist'ess, he haven't. Sept, he took up his hot water and his blacked boots, and put dem outside ob de door, an' rapped, 'bout an hour ago; but w'en he went up jist now to see if Mr. Aleyn didn't want nuffin, dere was de water settin' outside de door, cole as a stone, an' de boots dere, too. Sept didn't take de liberty to wake de gemman up, mist'ess, long as yer wasn't downstairs yerse'f. But now, mist'ess, shall I go tell Sept to call de gemman? I do reckon as he has obersleeped hisse'f, like you did, mist'ess."

"Then let him sleep on. Hand me my dressing gown and slippers, and I will sit here and read the rest of my letters. And—— Has Uncle Septimus had his breakfast?"

"Oh! yes, mist'ess. De ole man was up long 'fore daylight, an' got his own breakfas' an' eat it good 'fore ebber he started off to Ice Cliff. Law, mist'ess, you don't ebber catch ole Uncle Septimus ridin' out on a fastin' stummick dese mornin's. He's too 'fraid o' mashmire."

"There is miasma at this season, even here. But, Minty, since Sept has had his breakfast, tell him, from me, to go down and open and air the overseer's cottage. And if it wants any repairs that he can make, to go over

to Blantyre House and borrow a box of carpenter's tools. Tell him he may take the light wagon and horse to bring them with, if necessary."

"Yes, mist'ess," said the woman, as she left the room.

Comfortably wrapped in her dressing gown, with her feet in soft slippers, Erma sat in her easy-chair before the fire and gave herself up to the delight of reading that pile of her husband's letters.

She had been half an hour at this congenial employment, but had not got half through, when she heard her "new overseer" coming slowly down the attic steps.

She put aside her heap of letters and hastily arose and dressed herself.

She went down to the parlor, where she found Aleyn sitting beside the center table in front of the fire, looking listlessly over an old copy of "Heath's Book of Beauty."

He arose, laid down the book, opened his arms, and folded her to his bosom, saying, in a voice vibrating with the deepest emotion:

"My angel! My angel! It is to your heroic and unparalleled devotion that I owe this present peace and safety."

CHAPTER XXV.

HUNTED.

An exiled, outcast, houseless, nameless object,
For freedom fled; he scarce, by flight, secured it.
No holy churchman bade his parting steps
God speed! No faithful servant followed him,
For fear had withered every heart but hers,
Who, amid shame and ruin, clung to him still.

—MATURIN.

The new overseer breakfasted with the lady of the house that morning.

Old Septimus waited on the table, putting an extra amount of respect in his manner, as he served the guest; for, having been told by his mistress that the new overseer was a reduced gentleman, and suspecting, also, that this person was a poor relation of the lady, he thought, in his kindly heart, that the stranger was, from his adversities, only the more entitled to consideration.

After breakfast was over, Erma put on her hat, and ac-

companied by Mr. Aleyn, and old Septimus with the bunch of keys, took the path leading from the back premises of the house to the dark pine wood in the rear, from which the estate took its name, and on the edge of which stood the overseer's modest cottage—a plain, white-washed frame house of one story, with a sloping, high roof, short chimneys at each gable end, one green door in the middle of the front, a window with green blinds on each side, and three dormer windows in the steep roof.

There was a little garden in the front of the house, and a little yard in the rear.

Behind all arose the dark pine woods.

Old Septimus, preceding the little party, opened the wooden gate, and led the way up the weed-grown path to the green door, which he unlocked for the lady to enter, while he stood respectfully on one side.

"When my husband came into possession of this property, it was so heavily mortgaged that he was obliged to retrench all expenses, and, among the rest, to part with his overseer; nor do I think that he ever would have taken a new one, but for the fact of his own absence from the estate. No one has lived here since the late overseer left, nearly two years ago. I am afraid that the place is very much out of order; but, at any rate, Mr. Aleyn, you must remain with us at the house until it can be made comfortable for you," said Mrs. Wolfsohn, as she preceded her companions into the narrow passage with bare floor and whitewashed walls, and a narrow staircase leading to the attic above.

On each side of this passage were two opposite doors, leading into good-sized rooms, with open fireplaces, bare floors and white walls. These rooms were rudely furnished with plain deal chairs, tables and shelves, after the manner of the humbler cottages of the country.

The new overseer made no reply to her observations, but followed the lady through the four rooms below, and then up the narrow staircase to the four low-ceiled, sloping-roofed rooms in the garret. Three of these were furnished with cheap wooden bedsteads, and clean beds covered with home-made woolen counterpanes, and the third was fitted up with shelves and pegs as a general family storeroom.

Both above and below, the dust and must of a closed, neglected house had accumulated; some window sashes were loose in their frames and one or two doors rickety on their hinges.

"It will take two or three days to put this place in order, Mr. Aleyn. You must remain with us at least until Monday. On Monday you can take possession of your house, and enter upon your duties," said Erma, as she turned to leave the cottage.

Still the overseer made no reply, but followed the lady in silence to the open air.

"Him's a surly curmudgeon, if he's a deuced gemman twice ober," said old Sept to himself, as he watched them descend the path leading to the manor house—for the old man remained behind, being charged with the cleaning and repairing of the cottage.

On reaching home, Erma introduced the new manager into the little office or study in the rear of the house, where her husband, while acting as his own overseer, transacted all his business.

A fire was burning in the small fireplace, and the master's old leathern chair, well dusted, stood before the tall, walnut secretary on the falling leaf of which stood writing materials.

"I will leave you here for the present," said Erma, in a low voice. "Here you will find all the account books. The keys, you see, are in the locks. Take possession of them. Oh, how I hate to leave you, even for a few hours! But you know I must, even for your sake, lest I draw too much attention toward you."

"I know it, my angel girl! I know it," said Aleyn, with emotion.

Erma stooped and pressed a kiss upon his brow, as he sat in the armchair; but he gathered her in his arms, held her close to his bosom for a moment, and then returned her kiss and let her go.

Erma sighed and passed into the storeroom, to see what there was for dinner.

Old Minty was already waiting for her mistress.

"What have you got, Minty?" inquired the lady.

"Well, mist'ess, we had no f'esh meat in de house, you know; nothin' but bacon and salt pork an' corned beef;

so Septimus he killed a turkey an' a pair o' fowls yearly dis mornin' 'fore he went out."

"That was very thoughtful of old Sept. Well, then, roast the turkey, and fricassee the chickens with fresh cream. Also, make a delicate custard, flavored with peach. And try to do your best, Minty, will you?"

"Yes, mist'ess; my werriest best. But, my dear young mist'ess, no offense meant, and pardon begged, but will you please to tell your ole Aunt Minty whey you come across dis yere gemman oberseer?"

Erma hesitated for a moment, and then answered:

"In the North. You know nearly all our overseers come from New England."

"Does dey, honey? No, I didn't know! Dis one's a mighty han'some, gemmanly young man, dough! Mighty! I nebber see sich a han'some, gemmanly young man for an oberseer in all my life. Law! Gen'ally speakin' dey's po' an' or'nary enough! But don't you make too much ob him, mist'ess! It won't do! He's too young an' too han'some. An' yer husban' away, too! An' please, my dear mist'ess, don't yer take no 'fense at yer po' ole Aunt Minty. I don't mean no 'fense, honey; I don't, indeed. But yer's berry young an' innocent, mist'ess, an' yer ain't got no mudder to warn yer agin' de ebil as is in dis worl'. Dat's de reason I takes de liberty to 'vise you, honey, an' no 'fense meant."

"Indeed, I know there is none, dear Aunt Minty. I know that love for me inspires every word you speak," said Erma, warmly.

And then to change the conversation, which she was resolved should not be pursued any longer, she asked:

"What has become of the Storm Fiend, Aunt Minty? I have not heard of him lately. What has become of him?"

"De which honey?"

"The Storm Fiend. But now I remember, you called him the 'Thunder Devil.'"

"Oh, him? You mean him, mist'ess?"

"Yes. Has he been seen again?"

"Oh, yes, mist'ess," whispered the woman, in a tone of awe. "You know dat awful eagernoxious storm 'bout

two weeks ago? But mebbe it didn't go whey you was den."

"Yes, it did, and I remember it distinctly. It extended along the whole Atlantic coast, from Newfoundland to Florida, and inland for hundreds of miles, doing a great deal of damage. Was it very hard here?"

"Hard! Oh, my mist'ess! Long as I libbed t'rough dat storm, I mos' 'spects I shall lib forebber! An' he 'peared into de midst ob it! Oh, mist'ess! mist'ess!"

"Who saw him?" inquired Erma.

"Oh, my dear mist'ess, me an' Septimus seed him f'om de garret winder. We went up dar to look for him. We couldn't help it, my mist'ess. Somefin' draw'd us. An, shure 'nuff, when de lightnin' blazed, dere he was on de housetop opposite, leapin' and flingin' like old Satan gone ravin' mad! An' dough me an' Septimus was scared 'mos to def, dere we had to stan' an' watch him, 'cause we was bewitched an' couldn't move till he left off leapin', an' disappeared in a flash o' lightnin'. Oh, mist'ess, we libs in awful times!"

"Have you seen this apparition since?"

"No, mist'ess; dere ain't been no storm since den."

"And he has never been seen except in a thunder-storm?"

"No, mist'ess; nebber."

"Then, as there are not likely to be any more thunder-storms this season, I think you are not likely to be troubled again by the 'Thunder Devil.'"

"'Deed, mist'ess, I mighty glad to hear yer say so!" said Minty, fervently.

Erma gave some further directions about the dinner, and left the storeroom.

She then went and shut herself up in her parlor to write to her husband, telling him that she had just returned from a visit to the North, where she had been called to the bedside of a near relative, and that she had seucred the services of a well-recommended overseer.

This day, Friday, and the next, Saturday, were spent by old Septimus, assisted occasionally by Minty, and even by their mistress, in repairing, cleaning and fitting up the overseer's cottage for the occupancy of Mr. Aleyn.

Many extra comforts, in the shape of rugs for the

bedside and the fireside, so much needed on those bare floors, table linen, china, glasses, silver forks and spoons, a few standard books, and so forth—articles such as the cottage had never possessed before—found their way to Mr. Aleyn's little home.

Fires had been kept constantly burning since the house had been first opened, so as to thoroughly air and dry it, with its freshly whitewashed walls, and newly scrubbed floors and paint.

On Saturday night it was really ready for occupancy, and a very neat, comfortable and attractive, though humble, little home it was.

But still Erma objected to the removal of Mr. Aleyn until Monday.

There was no necessity for his taking possession in such a hurry. The house would be even dryer and more habitable by Monday. Mr. Aleyn should stay over Sunday at the manor house, and then take possession of his home and enter upon his duties the same day.

But the manager seemed bent upon his removal, and when he got an opportunity of speaking in private to the lady, he gave her his reason:

"It will not do, dear child," he said. "Who ever heard of an overseer treated with such favor as I am? It will excite remark. The house is ready now. I must go into it to-night."

Erma began to weep.

"Don't—don't, my dear! Think how much happier we are now than we have been for the last two years. We can now see each other every day," he said.

"Oh, but it is so sweet to have you under the same roof with me. It hurts me so to see you go. And to take a subordinate position, too."

"It is a heaven to what I have endured within the last two years."

"Oh, don't speak of it!" cried the girl, with a shudder.

"But that is over now, dear," he said, cheerfully.

"Yes, thank Heaven! Oh, I know, instead of despondng, I ought to be grateful; very, very grateful."

"Indeed, we both ought."

"Well, at any rate, you will come and dine with me to-morrow?" she pleaded.

"No, Erma; it will not do for me, my dear. Who ever heard of a hired overseer coming to dine at the same table with his lady employer?"

"It is very hard! but—there! I will not grumble; I will give thanks."

"You know, dear Erma, that the preparation of the cottage gave the flimsiest excuse for my taking meals with you here. According to the custom of the country, I should have taken them in the pantry or somewhere else. Now that the house is ready, I have no excuse for breaking a good rule. Do not regret that we cannot have everything as we wish; but rejoice that we have them as well as they are. Waste no thought upon my comfort. Let old Septimus wait on me and prepare my meals at the cottage."

"Yes, of course he will. And I am glad to know that he is an excellent cook, better even than Aunt Minty."

"There! I shall live the life of an epicure, you see. Good-night, my beloved girl. I am off to my new quarters," he said, as he gathered her to his bosom and kissed her fondly.

The next moment he was gone, followed by old Septimus, carrying his remaining effects.

Erma ran up to her own room, locked the door, and gave way to the storm of tears that had been choking her during the whole interview.

Then she knelt, and asked pardon for her repinings, gave thanks for deliverance from great perils, and entreated grace to bear impending trials.

She arose refreshed and strengthened, and prepared to go to rest, for it was now growing very late.

She slept well.

The next day was Sunday—the first Sabbath in October, and communion day in St. James' Church, Ice Cliff, to which Erma belonged.

Now, for the first time since her arrival in the neighborhood, Erma felt some reluctance to attend her church.

She dreaded to meet her neighbors, to hear their outspoken comments, to answer or evade their frank inquiries.

But Erma had never, except under the severest stress of circumstances, missed a communion service, and, from

strictly conscientious scruples, she resolved not to miss the sacrament on this day.

It was after she had formed this resolution that she perceived how much wiser it would be to meet her neighbors, and conduct herself in all respects just as she had done before her eccentric flight to the North.

She dressed in haste, went down to her early breakfast, that always on Sunday mornings was served plainly at seven o'clock, to give her time to attend church.

Old Minty was there to wait on her.

"Tell Septimus to put Henry to the little carriage, and get himself ready to drive me to church. And, Aunt Minty, do you go to the overseer's cottage and prepare his dinner. Never mind about mine. I can take a cup of tea and bit of cold bread and meat when I come home."

"Berry well, my dear young mist'ess. I'll do jes' as you say, and I is berry glad as you is goin' to church, berry."

"I am so sorry that we all can't go. It is such a pity you can't go, too."

"Oh, honey, nebber mine me. You needs it so much more'n me; 'sides which, I can go to love feas' at de Methody meetin' to-night," answered Minty, cheerfully.

So Erma went to church in the little, one-horse carriage driven by old Septimus, going over the turnpike road, up and down the wooded hills and vales, now in all their gorgeous autumn livery under the golden glory of the October sky.

It was after ten o'clock when they reached St. James' Church, a little Gothic building of red sandstone, with stained-glass windows, and walls half covered with ivy, surrounded by a churchyard half full of ancient gravestones—the whole occupying a natural opening in the woods, among the trees of which many carriages of various sorts and many saddle horses were standing.

Erma alighted.

Uncle Septimus tied Henry to the branch of a tree, leaving him tether enough to nip what remained of green grass beneath it.

Then mistress and servant went into the church, the mistress passing to her pew in the center aisle, the servant

ascending to the colored people's gallery on the right hand of the pulpit.

The church was full; that Erma saw in passing from the door to her pew.

Once seated in her pew, she bowed her head in private devotion for a space, and then raised it; but she did not look around, consequently she could not see who were in the church, though everyone saw her, even those in front of her having turned their heads for a moment to look while Erma's own head was bowed in prayer.

Very soon after she was seated, quite alone in her pew, the organ played a voluntary, and then the rector entered from the vestry, took his place at the reading desk and commenced the services.

Erma gave herself up to the worship, and soon lost consciousness of all her cares in the peace of Christian faith.

The service for that day was unusually long. Then came the sermon, and then the sacrament.

Two hours and a half had passed in the church, and yet Erma had never once felt weary; had, indeed, taken no heed of time, so much had she been comforted.

When the benediction had been pronounced, she still let a few minutes slip before she moved. Not until everyone was leaving the church did she rise from her seat.

It was not the custom in that neighborhood for people to converse within the sacred walls. They always waited to greet friends until they got outside.

Now, as soon as Erma Wolfsohn reached the churchyard, she found all her neighbors and friends waiting there to speak to her.

There were the Blantyres, the Morsets, the Bibbs, the Brighthome family, and there were Dr. Dutton, Cousin Wally Lambe, and—Miss Barbra Gunn!

All crowded to greet Erma, but gave place to Miss Barbra, who elbowed her way through to the front to intercept Mrs. Wolfsohn.

Who, indeed, would dare to stand in the path of Miss Gunn?

"Well, my dear girl, I am very glad to see you back, indeed! Are you quite well? You look well, indeed! Don't she look well, Dr. Dutton? You ought to be a

judge, being a medical man," exclaimed Miss Barbra, appealing to the physician, while she vigorously shook the hand of Erma.

The worthy man declared that he had never seen anyone look better.

It was true; but then the halo of the benediction received was still irradiating Erma's beautiful face.

Other friends now pushed their way to her presence to welcome her home.

Everyone seemed to have forgotten, or repudiated, their former evil thoughts of Erma Wolfsohn.

Only Mrs. Morset ventured to inquire, or to say:

"I hope you left that friend o' your'n, you went to see, better."

Erma hesitated for a moment, in visible embarrassment, and then answered:

"He is very much better than he has been for the last two years. In fact, I think he is now in fairly good health."

"Humph! a near relation o' your'n?"

"Yes, a near relation."

"What was his name, if a body may ask?" persisted Mrs. Morset.

Again Erma hesitated with visible perplexity, but soon recovered herself, brightened, and answered:

"His name was the same as my own maiden name."

"Oh, a Wildering! A relation by your father's side?"

"Yes."

The whole group had heard these questions and answers, and now Mrs. Morset was preparing to propound another question, when Gen. Bibb laughingly interrupted her by saying:

"Now, my dear madam, we cannot permit even a lady to quite monopolize Mrs. Wolfsohn on the first occasion of our meeting her after her long absence. It is only three weeks, but it seems ages, my dear Mrs. Wolfsohn. But now, we are all so happy to see you. Welcome!" exclaimed the general, cordially shaking her hand.

Erma responded brightly.

"And how are you satisfied with the new overseer, that, I am told, you have secured?" inquired the general, while all within hearing listened for the answer.

"I am quite satisfied with him," replied the lady, so frankly that the gossips were puzzled.

"That is all right, then," said the general, as he retreated with a bow.

Other friends followed suit, and it was half an hour before Erma, having invited all her neighbors to call on her at an early day, was permitted to enter her carriage.

As she drove off, old Septimus, slightly turning his head, said:

"I don't want to take no liberties, young mist'ess; but won't you jes' turn an' look at dem two ole fools?"

Erma instantly turned in the direction indicated, and saw Mr. Wally Lambe seated in an old gig, with Miss Mesh by his side, driving slowly along while he evidently poured "soft nonsense" into her willing ear.

"Yer see 'em, mist'ess, don't yer?"

"I see Mr. Lambe and Miss Mesh. But, Uncle Septimus, you have just come from the holy communion. You should mind how you think and speak of your fellow creatures."

"Dat's so, mist'ess. I t'ank you for 'mindin' me. I know I'm a hoary-headed sinner. An' if de Lord don't please to save me, I know I can't save myse'f. I know I falls from grace seventy times a day."

While Erma and her old servant thus conversed, the objects of their observation drove slowly out of sight in another direction.

Cousin Wally Lambe was courting Miss Ada Mesh. There could be no doubt about it. The fact was patent to all observers.

Cousin Wally was in the habit of pouring into her sympathizing ears tales of all his trials at The Marsh, and, indeed, they were real, and their name was legion.

As they drove leisurely on toward Brighthome, on this fine autumn Sunday afternoon, Mr. Lambe was rehearsing the scene that had taken place at Miss Barbra Gunn's tea table on the preceding Friday evening, when she had first heard of the arrival of Erma Wolfsohn and her strange companion.

"And what do ye think she wants me to do?"

"I'm sure I don't know—some atrocity!"

"Just so. She orders me to proceed to Darkwood, and

knock that overseer down, and kick him off the premises! Just as if I was able for to conquer that great Goliath of Gath. Just think of it, Miss Mesh! Why, he'd eat me!"

Miss Mesh turned and looked at her companion with some covert contempt. Physical weakness was no excuse to her for cowardice.

She herself, however, had a great curiosity to see the new overseer, and she was resolved, by some means or other, to gratify it. She thought she saw a way to do so. She therefore answered:

"At least, I think it would be well for you, the nearest male relative of the family, to take a look at this man, to find out what he is like, and to judge for yourself."

"How is that to be done without intrusion?" inquired Cousin Wally, dubiously.

"Well, I wish to call on Mrs. Wolfsohn to-morrow, in a neighborly way, to welcome her home. You might escort me there."

"So I could. Take you there in this gig, couldn't I?"

"Certainly. And on our way home we should pass near the overseer's cottage. You could easily make an excuse to stop and see him for a few moments—to give him the freedom of your bridge, for instance."

"So I could. Miss Mesh, you have a headpiece, you have. The more I see of you, the smarter I think you!" exclaimed the elderly lover, with enthusiasm.

"Thanks," said the lady.

"Now, I dare say, if you'd had my bridge you'd a made a fortin out of it."

"Very likely I should."

"Whereas, in my hands, it is a dead expense. Don't take toll enough to pay for repairs.

"That is a pity."

"Ah, Miss Mesh, it ain't good for man to be alone."

"No, it is not, Mr. Lambe. We have the highest authority for saying so."

"Well, then, what time to-morrow shall I call for you?"

"As early as you please, Mr. Lambe. But it is a very roundabout way you will have to come."

"Oh, I'd go three times as far for you."

And they drove on.

CHAPTER XXVI.

DANGER AT DARKWOOD.

How can I live without thee? How forego
Thy sweet discourse and love so dearly joined,
To live again in these wild woods alone?
No, no, I feel
The link of nature draw me; flesh of thy flesh,
Bone of thy bone, am I, and from thy state
Mine never shall be parted, bliss or woe. —MILTON.

On Monday morning Miss Ada Mesh and Mr. Wally Lambe carried out their intention of calling at Darkwood.

They arrived about ten o'clock.

Cousin Wally excused himself from going into the house, and decided to remain in the gig.

Miss Mesh was received by old Aunt Minty, ushered into the parlor, and accommodated with the best easy-chair by the fire.

"My mist'ess is in de study, talkin' business 'long o' de new oberseer," said Minty, as she stirred the fire up to a cheerful blaze.

"Oh, indeed!" exclaimed Miss Mesh, with an irrepressible sneer.

"I'll go and tell her you are here," added Minty, as she left the room.

Miss Mesh stuck out her feet to the fire, and waited.

In a few moments Minty put her head in at the door, and said:

"My mist'ess says if you will please to excuse her she will be here in about ten minutes."

"Very well," said Miss Mesh.

And Minty disappeared.

Ada Mesh having warmed her feet and hands, that were always inclined to be cold and blue, turned to the center table on her right and began listlessly to examine the old illustrated volumes upon it—"The Atlantic Souvenir," "Heath's Book of Beauty," etc.

But Miss Mesh cared neither for books nor pictures, but she did for news; so, as soon as her eyes lighted on a newspaper, still in its envelope, lying on the table, she snatched it up, drew it out of its wrapper, unfolded and began to examine it.

Almost the first item that caught her attention was the following:

"The escaped convict, Otho Herne, has not yet been recaptured. As the piers and railway stations have been carefully watched by detectives without affording any clew to the flight of the fugitive, he is supposed to be still concealed somewhere within the limits of the city. It will be seen by our advertising columns that the governor has offered a reward of one thousand dollars for his apprehension."

Miss Mesh's pale, thin face was a picture, as she lifted it up from the paper with a painfully perplexed expression. Her memory had never been good since that terrible malarial fever that had prostrated her mind and body during the preceding year.

She was trying now to recall some lost idea.

"'Herne,' 'Herne,'" she mused, screwing up her mouth and eyes, and contracting her brows. "'Herne'—'Herne.' Now, where have I heard or seen that name, connected with something very curious or scandalous, or something—— Let me see, now—what was it, again, I heard?

"Oh!" she suddenly exclaimed, as the facts flashed upon her memory. "Why, that was the faded name I deciphered on Erma Wildering's collar! And that was the name on the hearing of which she fainted dead away at the dinner table! Sure enough! 'Herne'! Oh, yes! And Herne is an escaped convict, is he? And the governor has offered a reward for his apprehension, eh? Well, now, let us look at that same advertisement!" she concluded, hastily turning about the paper and running her eyes up and down the columns until she found the following:

"One Thouand Dollars Reward—The State of New York will pay one thousand dollars for the apprehension, and delivery up to justice, of Otho Herne, the convicted murderer of Gustave Perlemonte. The said Herne is a man of about fifty years of age, and six feet in height, with a gaunt form, and stooping shoulders, fair complexion, light-brown hair cut short, long, thin face, high forehead, light-gray eyes, aquiline nose, wide, thin lips,

and long, beardless chin. He wore, when last seen, the prison uniform of black and white striped linsey woolsey. By order of the governor," etc., etc.

"Well!" exclaimed Miss Mesh, letting her hand, with the paper in it, drop into her lap, while she raised her head and gazed off into vacancy. "Well! What is any soul alive to think of this? Anyhow, I am not a-going to be such a fool as I was before, and take Susan Blantyre, or anyone else, into my confidence, but I will watch for the newspapers, and read every one I can lay my hands on, and it will go hard, but I'll find it all out, sooner or later."

But steps were heard approaching. Some one was coming.

Ada Mesh had scarcely time to thrust the newspaper into her pocket and throw the broken envelope into the blazing fire, before the door opened and Erma Wolfsohn entered, smiling.

"How do you do, Miss Mesh? It is very kind of you to come over and see me," said the hostess, holding out her hand.

"I thought I would call and see how you are getting on," said the visitor, rising to receive the salutation.

"Now, come into my room, and lay off your bonnet, and stay all day with me," said Erma, hospitably.

"Oh, thank you; but I couldn't. I only came to make a very short call. I am busy at home, making up little Fance's fall clothing," said Miss Mesh.

Then Erma inquired after Fance, who had always been a great favorite with her, and about Mr. Gladden and all the household at Brighthome, and learned, to her satisfaction, that all were well and doing well.

Miss Mesh stayed but twenty minutes, and then arose, excused herself, and took leave.

Erma politely accompanied her to the door, and seeing Cousin Wally seated in the gig, she went out and shook hands with him, and invited him to come in.

But Cousin Wally, like Miss Mesh, excused himself by saying that he had no time, for after taking Miss Mesh to Brighthome, he would have to hurry back to The Marsh to attend to the cider pressing.

So they took leave of Erma, and drove away toward Brighthome.

A little in the rear of Darkwood House they left the turnpike road and turned into a lane on their left hand that led between the orchard and the woods straight up to the overseer's cottage.

Cousin Wally pulled up at the gate, and passing the reins to Miss Mesh as he alighted, inquired:

"Now, what excuse did you say I was to give for calling? I most forget."

"Oh, to give him the freedom of your bridge—a written permit to pass it forever, without paying toll."

"Yes, to be sure."

And leaving Miss Mesh holding the reins as she sat in the gig, Cousin Wally opened the gate, waddled up to the closed door and rapped.

The summons was promptly anwered by the overseer.

Miss Mesh, peering forward with her keen, gray eyes, saw before them a tall, erect, handsome man, with dark-olive complexion, fine features, large, luminous, dark eyes, short, curling, black hair and long, flowing, black beard. He was clothed in a new but coarse suit of the country cloth known as pepper-and-salt and seemed, on nearer inspection, to be about thirty-five or forty years of age.

"What a splendid fellow!" was the secret comment of Miss Mesh, who was by no means indifferent to manly beauty. "What a very magnificent fellow! Well, he's no common overseer, that is certain; but whoever he is, he is not Otho Herne. That is equally, or even more certain," she concluded, as she recollected the printed description of the escaped convict, with his stooping shoulders, scanty, light-brown hair, fair complexion, pale, gray eyes, thin, wide mouth, and beardless chin.

Meanwhile, Cousin Wally met the overseer.

"Oh! Ah! You are Mrs. Wolfsohn's new manager, I believe? Well, I am Mr. Walter Lambe, of The Marsh. I was driving past, and thought I would just stop and make you a social call," said Cousin Wally, with some perplexity, in reply to the mute questioning in the grave, surprised face of the stranger.

"Thanks. Will not the lady alight? Will you not both

come in and rest?" inquired the manager, as from habitual courtesy.

"Oh, no; much obliged to you," began Cousin Wally; but Miss Mesh took the case in her own capable hands by throwing the reins on the back of the horse, and stepping down from the gig.

"Oh! Ah!" remarked Cousin Wally.

And they followed the overseer, who conducted them into a parlor on the right hand of the passage, where he placed two flag-bottomed chairs before the fire for their accommodation.

"This is my friend, Miss Mesh, of Brighthome, Mr. ——," began Cousin Wally, introducing his companion, and purposely hesitating, that their host might supply the word he wanted.

"My name is Aleyn, and I am happy to make the acquaintance of Miss Mesh," said the overseer, bowing to the lady.

"You are from New York, I presume," said Miss Mesh, as she sank into the seat, and put her ever-cold feet to the fire.

"I am originally from New Orleans; but I have been a traveler in many regions, and a sojourner in other cities."

"Ah! 'A rolling stone gathers no moss,'" said Cousin Wally, saying the worst thing he could have said, just by way of saying something; for the poor man was as innocent of offense as he was destitute of tact.

"I am afraid you are right, sir; for I have been a very rolling stone, and, certainly, I have gathered no moss. Hence, you see me in this subordinate situation," said the stranger, with a mournful smile.

"Oh, well, when matters get to their worst, they always mend, you know," said Cousin Wally, cheerfully.

"When they get to their worst; but how does anyone know when that is, or how much worse 'matters' may become than they are at any given time?" inquired Mr. Aleyn.

"That's so," agreed Cousin Wally, with a solemn shake of his head.

And then he launched forth on the broad subject of the

vicissitudes of human life, illustrating it by his own experience in bridges, speculations and mortgages.

Miss Mesh listened, and watched her opportunity to draw the conversation around to the subject in which she was interested.

"But whatever your trials in this respect have been, Mr. Lambe, there can be no vicissitudes in the country equal to those in our large cities. Think of all those recent failures in the Northern cities—in New York especially. You have been in New York recently, I presume, Mr. Aleyn, and must know of these things."

"If you mean—if you mean the city, no; I have not been there very lately," replied the overseer.

"No? Well, I was in hopes—hearing that you had come from the North—that you had come from the city, and might even be able to give me news of some people there in whom I am interested."

"My dear lady, have you ever been in New York?" inquired Mr. Aleyn, with a peculiar smile.

"No, never."

"I thought not. If you had been, you would know what a Babylon that great city is, and how people may live next door to each other for half a century without becoming acquainted. Nevertheless, tell me the name of your friends, as it is barely possible that I may have heard of them."

"I did not say they were friends. I said they were people in whom I am interested. You know we may be interested in creditors, or criminals, or even in enemies," replied Miss Mesh, looking steadily into the dark, handsome face of the overseer.

"That is very true. But the name of these people, my dear young lady—I may have heard of them."

Miss Mesh raised her keen, gray eyes to the dark, luminous orbs that were kindly regarding her, and answered, slowly:

"Herne!"

There was no doubt of it, the handsome stranger grew deadly pale, though he controlled himself in all other respects, as he answered:

"I regret to say that I cannot give you any information on that subject."

Miss Mesh, watching him keenly, was about to speak again, when Cousin Wally unconsciously came to the rescue of the overseer, by asking him whether he approved of the new mowing machine, whereupon the talk turned upon "new-fangled engines," versus old-fashioned hands.

And the two men talked of nothing else, until Miss Mesh, losing patience, arose to take leave.

"And to think, after all, that I forgot to give him the permit to cross over my bridge without paying toll!" said Cousin Wally, as they drove on toward Brighthome.

That same day Erma Wolfsohn had quite a number of other visitors.

Miss Barbra Gunn and her two grown-up nieces came; Gen. Bibb and Dr. Dutton followed; and Mrs. Morset and her nieces-in-law arrived last.

All these had merely come in to call, but were persuaded to stay until after dinner. Toward evening the rector, Dr. Cleveland, and old Mr. Gladden made their appearance.

Erma could not feel that she was neglected.

The days that succeeded this Monday were spent in inspecting her whole house and putting it in order for the winter.

But when Saturday came, and the day was so fine, Erma resolved to return at least some of the calls that had been made upon her.

So she ordered her carriage, dressed herself, and set out for Brighthome to return the visit of Miss Mesh and Mr. Gladden.

Up hill and down dale, through the gorgeous autumn woods, under the glorious autumn sky, she went, and she reached Brighthome at about eleven o'clock in the forenoon.

She was received with acclamation by Uncle Jugurtha and Aunt Winny Wicket, who told her, however, that their master, Mr. Gladden, had taken little Miss Fance with him, and had gone to Ice Cliff, to buy her some new dresses that she herself was to be permitted to choose for autumn wear; but that Miss Mesh was in the parlor, and would be "proud to see Miss Erma."

And both the servants escorted and ushered Mrs. Wolfsohn into the presence of Miss Mesh.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you, Mrs. Wolfsohn. They are all gone away to-day, and I was feeling quite lonesome. Do come into the hall chamber, and take off your bonnet, and spend the day with me," said Ada Mesh, with effusion.

"I would willingly; but, in truth, to-day I have several other calls to make," answered Erma, frankly, as she seated herself with her back to the window.

How thankful she was a little later on to have that poor, telltale face of hers in the shadow.

"More calls to make to-day?" said Miss Mesh, in a reproachful tone.

"Oh, yes; I must see Miss Gunn and Mrs. Morset and, perhaps, if I have time left to go so far, Mrs. Blantyre," replied Erma, smiling.

Miss Mesh also smiled, with a very cool expression, as she muttered significantly to herself:

"I do not think you will make any more calls to-day, after I have done with you, my lady."

Not a word of all this did Erma Wolfsohn hear or suspect. She began to talk of Mr. Gladden and of little Fance Fleetwood, and of the wonderful affection that existed between the old man and the child.

Then they discussed neighborhood interests, church matters, parish work and other kindred subjects.

As they talked, Erma noticed Miss Mesh fingering a half-folded newspaper that lay on the table, under her hand.

"What have you there?" at length inquired Erma.

"Oh! The New York *Pursuivant*. And such an item in it!" exclaimed Miss Mesh.

"What is it?" inquired Erma, unsuspiciously.

"Now, what would you think of our quiet, orderly, humdrum old neighborhood being the scene of a great sensation?"

"What do you mean?" inquired the lady, beginning to grow uneasy.

"Or, of its being the chosen sanctuary of a great criminal?"

"What! Oh, Heaven!" breathed Erma, in an expiring voice, as she sank back in her chair and drew from

her pocket a vial of sal-ammonia, which she stealthily applied to her nose.

"Listen here," said Miss Mesh, reading:

"'A clew has at last been found to the hiding place of Otho Herne, the murderer of Gustave Perlemonte. He is not hidden in the city, as was for a long time erroneously supposed, but it is ascertained beyond a doubt that he has fled in disguise to the southern part of Virginia, and has been heard of in the little village of Ice Cliff. Mr. Hunter, of the metropolitan police, has left for that place.'"

"Mrs. Wolfsohn! What! Are you going?" exclaimed Miss Mesh, seeing her visitor rise, pale with suppressed emotion.

"Yes. Good-by!" said Erma, adding breathlessly to herself: "I must go now, if I hope to succeed in saving him."

CHAPTER XXVII.

A PANIC AT DARKWOOD.

Must I consume my life—this little life—
In guarding against all may make it less?
It is not worth so much! It were to die
Before my hour, to live in dread of death!
—BYRON.

On the same Saturday morning upon which Mrs. Wolfsohn drove out to return calls, old Minty seized the opportunity of her mistress' absence to give the parlor what she called a good sweeping and dusting.

Accordingly, as soon as Mrs. Wolfsohn had turned from the front door, old Minty set all the parlor chairs and stands out in the hall, threw up all the windows, scattered handfuls of damp tea leaves over the old, faded carpet, and began sweeping in good earnest, singing a rousing revival hymn as she swept:

"De besom ob de Lord, brudders,
De besom ob de Lord!
We'll sweep ole Satan out, brudders,
Wid all his debblish horde!"

Going at her work with such vigor of arms and lungs,

each inspiring the other, Aunt Minty soon finished sweeping the carpet.

Then she sat down to rest, while the dust should settle; after which she arose and carefully wiped and brought in the chairs and stands, and restored them to their places, one by one.

When she had dusted and replaced all the larger articles of furniture, and wiped off the mantelshelf and candlesticks and snuffer tray, she went and changed her furniture duster for a clean, fine, old napkin, and returned to wipe the illustrated books and the daguerrotypes that lay piled up on a chair, preparatory to being replaced on the table.

First she carefully shook the faded yellow damask table cover and spread it over the top, and then she sat down in a chair beside the center table, drew the other chair, with the books and pictures, before her and went to work.

She wiped the illustrated books with great care and arranged them with studied negligence, as she had seen her young mistress do, upon the top of the table.

Then she began on the daguerreotypes, and wiped them all, inside and out, replacing them, one after another, upon the table.

Finally she arose, shook her clothing, looked down on the carpet, turned the chair around, looked under it, and exclaimed:

"Hi! whey dat oder dogtype gone? Wot I done wid it? Dere used to be seben dogtypes here, I knows dat! And now dere's on'y six! But, le's see! Maybe I miscounted. No! Dere's on'y six here now, an' dere used to be seben, I knows dat! 'Deed an' 'deed I don't want nuffin' lost while it is under my care, I does not! 'Specially a fambly portrait, and all dese yer dogtypes is fambly portraits! I knows dat much!"

While Minty had been uttering her thoughts to herself, after the manner of her race, she had also been diligently searching under chairs and tables, and in every hole and corner in and near the parlor, to find the missing article.

"I mus' 'quire into dis yer business. I didn't count 'em afore I took 'em off de table. I jes' took 'em all off and heaped 'em on de chair, an' I wish I had counted 'em

den, for den I should know whedder I had drapped it, or some un else had too it away. Lor', 'deed I feel dreadful put out. Dis is de fust time as ebber anyfing was missed arter me. I hopes I'll fine it or hear 'bout it 'fore my young mist'ess comes home. It's drefful mortifyin' to my feelin's to have dis fing missed arter me. I mus' go ax Sept if he knows ennyfing 'bout it. Now, Lor', what a ole fool I is! Sept gone to drive my young mist'ess out to make her wisits. Well, I'll look in de oder rooms. Maybe somebody's took it out, dough I nebber did know it to be took out'n dis room before."

And during all the time that Minty talked to herself, she never ceased to search diligently through parlor and hall for the lost picture.

Then, from the parlor, she went all over the house, taking one room at a time, and going entirely through it—searching even her mistress' drawers and boxes, to which she had, at all times, free access.

"Well, it ain't in dis house. It ain't. Dat's sartain. An' wot will my young mist'ess say when she comes home?

"Oh!" she suddenly exclaimed, as a bright thought struck her. "Oh, I bet I knows whar it is. Young mist'ess did len' dat gemman oberseer some books to read, and some little picters an' fings to ornament his parlor. Now, I knows, in course, as my young mist'ess would nebber len' de loan ob one ob dese yere sacrit fambly portraits, no way yer could fix it. But still, in carryin' away de oder fings, de dogtype might a got mixed up long ob dem, an' got tuk ober dere. Ef so, it was a mistake. I knows it was a mistake. An' now, I'se jes' gwine to take myse'f right up to de oberseer's house an' see if it is dere, jes' for de satisfaction ob my mind. 'Cause if I find it dere, I shall be easy; not dat I would fetch it home—I wouldn't venter for to take sich a liberty. But I'd know what had come ob it, so if my young mist'ess ax me, I could tell her whey it is. I do hope it is at de oberseer's house. An' now I'm boun' to fine out.

"But stop," she said, thoughtfully. "I mus' examine an' see, fust, which dogtype it is dat's gone. 'Twon't nebber do to go on a fool's errand up to Marse Aleyn, an' say, 'Has yer got dat dogtype?' An' he say, 'Which dog

type?' An' I stan' dere like an idiwut an' can't tell. No, sar. I mus' go see which ob de seben is los'."

With this she returned to the parlor, and sat down by the center table to examine carefully the daguerreotypes, with the names and faces of all of which she was perfectly familiar.

"Dere's old Marse Gran'fader Wolfsohn, dat's one; ole Mist'ess Gran'moder Wolfsohn, dat's two; ole Marse Gran'fader North, dat's free; ole Mist'ess Judith North, dat's four; my own dear mist'ess, Madam Wolfsohn Perlemonte, dat's five; my dear young marster, Marse Rodolph Wolfsohn, dat's six. Hi! who's dat oder one, wot's los'? Dey all seems to be here as I cares about, but here's only six, an' I know as dere was seben! Who dat oder one? Oh, I know! Shaw! Wot made me forget? Is I fallin' inter my dotage, I wonder? It is Marse Gustave Perlemonte, sure. Yes, Marse Perlemonte. An' now I'm gwine to march myself right straight up to de oberseer's house, an' ax him if he know anyfing 'bout Mr. Gustave Perlemonte, my young marster's stepfader, an' my young mist'ess' stepfader-in-law's dogtype. An' I gwine to ax him please not to take no 'fense, 'cause none wa'n't meant."

So discoursing with herself, Minty went about the house, carefully fastening up the doors and windows, back and front.

Then she threw on her red, plaid shawl and her black silk, wadded hood, and having locked the last door—the back one—behind her, she bent her steps up through the back premises, garden field and apple orchard, to the overseer's cottage.

As she drew near she saw Mr. Aleyn come up from a lower field, on the left of the orchard, and walk with weary steps and stooping figure toward his own gate.

"It's 'prisin' how diffunt dat man do carry hisse'f at diffunt times! Sometimes he's erect as a clo's-prop; den he droops down like he was gwine to drop to pieces. Now anybody to look at him creepin' along dere, bent double, 'ould fink as he was sebenty-five years ole, 'stead of 'bout firty-five."

As old Minty spoke, she drew nearer the cottage, and finally met the overseer at the gate.

"Mornin', Marse Aleyn. Hopes I see yer well dis mornin', sar," was Minty's cordial greeting.

The absent-minded man, taken somewhat by surprise, drew himself up with a jerk, and stood erect as a post, while he answered, with his habitual kindness:

"I thank you, aunty. I am quite well, and trust that you are so."

"Yes, yes; bress de Lor'! Would yer mine me comin' in an' settin' down to res' myse'f a minnit in de kitchen, sar? I has got some 'queries for to make, an' no 'fense meant."

"Certainly not. Come in, and rest here in my sitting room. There is no fire in the kitchen at this hour," said Mr. Aleyn, kindly, as he led the way into the narrow passage, and thence into the little parlor on the left.

Aunt Minty made a courtesy before seating herself in the big, flag-bottomed armchair that the overseer pointed out.

"You said you had some inquiries to make of me," observed the manager, as he stood in the chimney corner, with his elbow leaning on the mantelpiece.

"Yes, marster," answered old Minty, letting her glance rove all over the room, in search of the missing case, supposed to be there, but seeing no signs of its presence.

"Well, what questions have you to ask?" inquired Mr. Aleyn.

Then Minty spoke; but unwilling to accuse the gentleman before her, even by the slightest implication, she entered upon the subject with the greatest possible delicacy, taking upon herself all the responsibility and blame—if there was to be blame.

"Well, yer know, marster, dem dere books an' pictur's an oder little fings as I fotch down here f'om de house, by my young mist'ess' orders, wen we was fixin' up dis parlor?"

"Certainly, there they are; some on the corner stands and some on the mantelpiece here."

"Yes, marster; but I don't see what I has come to look for," answered Minty, staring hopelessly around.

"What have you come to look for?"

"Why, marse, dat dogtype wot I can't fine at home, an'

wot I mus' habe fotched here by mistake 'mong de oder fings—but I don't see it nowhar."

"Do you mean a dog collar?" inquired the puzzled overseer. "There is none here."

"No, marse! He! he! he!" laughed the old woman. "I don't mean no dog collar. I mean a dogtype. A pictur' in a 'rocco case, yer know, marster."

"Do you mean a daguerreotype?"

"Yes, marster, dat's it! a daggertype; on'y I nebber can get fings right, if dey's onfamiliar to me! A daggertype, sar."

"What daguerreotype?"

"One as I must a fotch here, long o' de oder fings by mistake, 'cause I nebber would a fotched it, if I had know'd wot I was doin' ob; for it's a wallable fambly portrait, an' de onliest one of de gemman as we's got, an' him dead an' gone, too! An' sick a dreffful death!" said old Minty, sorrowfully shaking her head.

"I do not think the picture is here. Indeed, I know it is not," said Mr. Aleyn, thoughtfully.

"'Deed, I'se mons'rous sorry 'bout dat! I was so in hopes it was here! One ob de wallable fambly portraits, too, wot can't be replaced!" groaned Minty, still solemnly shaking her head.

"Whose picture was it?" inquired Mr. Aleyn, in kindly sympathy.

"I—I t'ought I told you, marster. Didn't I tell yer, now?"

"Indeed, you did not."

"Well, dere, den! Jest see dat! How forgetful I is! Well, sar, de pictur' were Marse Gustave Perlemonte."

"Gustave Perlemonte!" echoed Mr. Aleyn.

And he changed color, and sat down in the nearest chair.

He remembered well the picture and its fate, as well as the original of the picture and his fate. The living man had perished by water; his "counterfeit presentment" by fire.

He had in some way received an impression, when he saw his daguerreotype on the parlor table, that he had been a mere acquaintance of the Darkwood family. Now,

from the words of old Minty, it would appear that he was a relative, perhaps a very near relative, of the Wolfsohns.

"Gustave Perlemonte!" he repeated, in a troubled tone.

"Yes, sar; Marse Gustave Perlemonte, wot was de late marster ob Darkwood."

"Gustave Perlemonte, the late master of this estate!" exclaimed the overseer, staring with starting eyes at the speaker.

"Yes, sar. Sartainly! Wasn't he our Miss Erma Wolfsohn's stepfather-in-law?" Minty explained, a little impatiently.

The manager continued to stare at her, murmuring, in dismay:

"Gustave Perlemonte Erma Wolfsohn's——"

"Stepfather-in-law. Yes, sar. Dis is de way it was. Marse Gustave Perlemonte is Miss Erma Wolfsohn's step-father-in-law, 'cause he was Marse Rodolph's step-father, an' his mother's second husband, consekently he was de marster ob dis estate until he was mos' cruelly murdered by one ob dem dere viluns wot go up an' down de worl' like a roarin' lion seekin' whom dey may devour."

The overseer dropped his head upon his open hands.

He did not know how heavy a curse this man had been to the family into which he had married. For aught that he knew, Gustave Perlemonte, with all his outside vices, might have been a tender husband, affectionate father and indulgent master within the circle of his own domestic relations.

"Oh, Heaven of heavens!" he moaned to himself. "She never told me of this! She never even hinted this to me! She has permitted me to seek sanctuary in this man's house; to eat of his bread and drink of his cup! To sleep under his roof! Me! whose hands are red with the blood of his father! How could Erma have done this thing? Yet she acted for the best, I know! Perhaps this was the only course that she could have taken, under the circumstances! Yet, that Gustave Perlemonte should have borne this relation to the man my Erma married—that, of all the men on earth, she should have married the step-son of Gustave Perlemonte—surely, this cannot be true! I have not heard aright, or there is some other

mistake. Woman!" he suddenly exclaimed, turning upon Minty.

"Sar!" cried the old creature, starting out of her seat with consternation.

"Did you tell me that this Mr. Gustave Perlemonte was the stepfather of Mr. Rodolph Wolfsohn?"

"Yes, sar!" cried Minty, in terror. "Wot's de matter 'long ob yer, Marse Aleyn? Is yer took wid a fit?" she asked, with her eyes starting from her head.

"This is terrible!" groaned the overseer, without heeding the state into which he had thrown the colored woman.

She, thinking now that he referred to the tragic fate of her master's stepfather, hastened to soothe him, or to try to do so.

"Yes, marster; it was dreffful for dat gemman to be tuk off in his sins as he was. But it tuk place a long ways from here, an' well as I can onnerstan' it, he did fotch it on hisse'f. None ob we could a helped it. 'Twasn't our fault, marster, an' it wasn't yours. So wot's de use ob taken on so about it?"

"Hush! hush! Oh, hush!" groaned the overseer, covering his face with his hands.

"Well, marster, I can hole my tongue, if yer wants me to; an' long as yer fink de pictur' ain't here——"

"I know it is not here," interrupted Aleyn.

"Well, den, long as you know it isn't here, I might's well be gwine home. I hab got heaps to do 'fore de mist'ess comes back."

And Minty tied the strings of her hood, gathered her shawl about her shoulders, and took a respectful leave of the overseer, who appeared to be not sorry to see her go.

As soon as the door had closed upon the woman Mr. Aleyn went upstairs in search of the black traveling bag that had been his only luggage when he arrived at Darkwood.

He packed it with a few necessaries and brought it down.

Then he seated himself at his table, with writing materials before him, to begin a letter.

Meanwhile, old Minty had returned to the house, bewailing the loss of the "dogtype," and resolving, as a last

resort, to inquire of her mistress. When she had settled this point in her mind, she began to think of her interview with the overseer, and his agitation on hearing the name of Gustave Perlemonte.

"What a feelin' heart dat man has got, to be sure! What a good marster he'd make! Yes, an' he'll make a good oberseer, too. Yer wouldn't catch him a-puttin' upon de poor darkies! No, indeed! He's got too feelin' a heart. Why, Lor'! he took on as much 'bout Marse Gustave Perlemonte being kilt as if it had been his own murdered father!" she remarked, in a confidential tone, to the silver-plated candlestick she was dusting; for she had returned to the parlor to put the last touches to her work there.

"An' now I reckon I habe finished this job. I don't fink as my mist'ess'l find a speck o' dirt in dis place wen she come home. An' now I'll go an' see 'bout puttin' on de dinner. Le's see! Wot did she tell me to git her ag'in? Dis here losin' de dogtype done put eberyfing else out'n my head. Oh, I know. 'Twas a frisky chicken." (Minty meant a fricassee chicken, and she was rather famous for skill in the preparation of that dainty.) "Yes, a frisky chicken, an' apple float. Dat young mist'ess o' mine is rudder deliky in her little tastes," said Minty to herself, as she went into the kitchen and commenced operations by kindling up the dull fire.

Forgetting the lost daguerreotype and all her other cares, she went to her work, singing another appropriate hymn—for all the quaint hymns of the darkies are intimately associated with their daily life and business.

Thus, as Minty threw handfuls of chips and brushwood on the smouldering fire, and saw it burst into flames, she lifted up her voice and sang with vim:

"Now all de wheat is stored wid care—
An' we's de wheat, brudders!
De tares He'll neider hear nor spare—
An' dey's de tares, brudders!
He'll cast dem tares in flaming fire,
In flaming fire, brudders!
Let sinners dread that day of ire,
It's not for we, brudders!"

"Now, I don't hold much 'long o' dat hymn," said

Minty, to the tongs, as she took them up to put the chunks together. "No, I don't. I on'y singged it 'cause it wor suitable to kindlin' de fire. I ain't so dead sure as we is de wheat! Leastways, I'm feared we ain't de fust quality ob wheat, to be stored wid care. No! dat hymn do sound too sumptuous for anyfing! 'Sides, I'se sorry for de poor tares—dat is, sinners—burned up in de fire. Who dat dere?"

She was interrupted in her singing and working by the sudden appearance of the overseer in the open kitchen door.

He was dressed and accoutred as for a journey. He wore his best suit of pepper-and-salt kerseymere cloth, and a low-crowned, black, felt hat. Over his left arm hung a folded overcoat; in his left hand he carried a furled umbrella; on his right arm hung a well-filled, black traveling bag; in his right hand he held a sealed letter.

"Minty!" he exclaimed, startling the woman at her singing.

"Good gracious, Marse Aleyn! I t'ought as you was de Abriel Gangel! I mean de Gabriel Angel! Sho! I dunno wot I mean! I'm so 'fused. But I was jest finkin' ob dat same blowin' ob de horn w'en you 'peered," said Minty, confusedly and apologetically.

"Give this letter to your mistress when she comes, Minty," the overseer said, as he put the missive in her hand.

"Yes, marster; sartainly," said the woman, wiping her fingers before she took the letter.

"And, Minty, be very careful of it."

"Yes, marster; but——"

"Keep it in your own pocket——"

"Yes, marster; but is——"

"Keep it safely until your mistress comes home, and——"

"Yes, marster, so I will; but is you——"

"Then give it to her with your own hands."

"Yes, sar; I will. I will, indeed; but is yer a-gwine away so sudden?"

"I am going away. Obliged to go away. The letter will explain to your mistress."

"An' is it good-by, marster?" inquired Minty, in astonishment.

"Yes, it is good-by."

"And ain't you ebber comin' back ag'in, marster?"

"I do not know."

"Well, dis is suddint, an' wot will my mist'ess say when she come home?" exclaimed Minty.

"The letter will satisfy her. By the way, put it in your pocket now. Don't hold it so carelessly in your hand; you might drop it."

Minty secured the letter, saying, as she did so:

"I nebber lost anyfing trusted to me in my life, 'cept 'twas dat same said misfort'nate dogtype! Oh-h-h!"

Minty's exclamation was caused by a sudden suspicion that flashed upon her mind, to the effect that her inquiries concerning the lost daguerreotype had something to do with the sudden departure of the overseer, who might have taken offense at her visit and questions. This suspicion so frightened her that she let the overseer say good-by, and stride rapidly away, without once attempting to address him on the subject to solve her own doubts.

"Dere! Now I has gone an' done it! Went down dere 'quirin' arter de los' dogtype, jest like I s'picioned Marse Oberseer Aleyn ob stealin' it! 'Nuff to 'fend him, an' dribe him away from de plantation. Dough, 'deed, I didn't mean nuffin' 'tall ob de sort. Now I s'pect he's gone an' 'plained o' me in dis letter he tell me to gib to my young mist'ess. Well, I mus' gib it to her, dough it do 'plain agin' me. Lor'! it's like dem letters Marse Gustave Perlemonte used to gib de poor fellows to carry to his oberseer, which always was:

"'Gib de bearer nine-an-thirty, well laid on, an' lock him up on bread an' water till to-morrow mornin'.'

"Not as I finks my own dear young mist'ess would hurt a hair o' my head, let alone wot I'd do—— Glory be to Heaben, wot's de matter now!"

This outburst from Minty was caused by the sudden entrance of the county constable, John Jones, accompanied by one policeman, while two others remained on horseback outside the door.

"Is your mistress at home?" inquired Mr. Jones, seat-

ing himself, without invitation, on one of the kitchen chairs, and signing to his comrade to take another.

"N-n-no, sar; my mist'ess is gone out a-wisitin'," answered old Minty, whose few remaining teeth were chattering with terror at the visit of the constable, whose presence was always connected, in her mind, with crime, shame and ruin.

"Is any other white member of the household in?" pursued the officer.

"N-n-n-no, sar."

"Well, then, we must proceed without them. My good woman, we have a search warrant here to go through the house and premises in——"

"It it abou—bou—bou—bout de dogtype?" stammered Minty, chattering and shaking.

"Dogs? No, it is to look for a man—one Otho Herne—supposed to be concealed here."

"Man! Ne-ne-never heard of sich a fing in all my life, Marster Consoble! Dere ain't no man here," said Minty, beginning to recover from her panic as soon as she learned that the dread visit of the constable was not connected with any member of the family. "I 'sures you, marster, dere ain't no man 'cealed here."

"We shall see. Give me the keys, my good woman."

"Dere dey is, hangin' right up dere 'fore your eyes, Marse Consoble. You kin take 'em down, but same time I 'sures you dere ain't a key turned in dis house. Who we gwine turn 'em agin'? But dere dey is, marster. Take 'em," said Minty, who never dreamed of such a thing as resisting an officer of the law.

The constable took down the bunch of keys, and, followed by his comrade, left the kitchen to search the house, while one of the mounted policemen stationed himself on guard in the rear of the building, and the other rode around to watch the front.

As for poor old Minty, she was so utterly demoralized by all that had happened as to render her quite incapable of going on with her work.

She sat down and threw her apron over her head, and began to rock herself up and down, bewailing the situation:

"Dat ebber I should lib to see my marster's house en-

tered and inwaded by consobles an' sich! An'—oh, my good gracious!" she suddenly exclaimed, throwing off her apron and listening. "I hear de sound o' wheels! And dat's Henry's own snort. Dey's been oberdribin' ob him. I know horse Henry's snort among a t'ousand. Dat's his snort an' he's fetched my po' dear young mist-'ess home. Oh, what will she say? I must go an' meet her an' warn her wot's here."

With these words Minty started up and ran out of the kitchen door, and around toward the front of the house, where she suddenly paused and stood still, exclaiming:

"Too late! Dere she is stan'in', pale as deaf, 'fore dat dere impident horse-marine ob a strange consoble. I mus' go 'round dere an' purteck her agin' him, anyways."

And she went.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AFTER THE FUGITIVE.

"Farewell, my own! A long farewell!' he cried.
"Perhaps I ne'er may visit thee again,
But die, as many an exiled heart hath died,
Of its own hidden, cureless, homesick pain." —BYRON.

On taking leave of Miss Mesh, Erma Wolfsohn had hurried from the house and entered the carriage in great agitation, saying to her old coachman, who was waiting on the box:

"Septimus, I must get home immediately! Drive for your life! Drive as you never did before! Ask no questions, but drive as fast as you can without killing the horse!"

Prodigiously astonished, and profundly wondering what could carry his mistress back so suddenly, when he knew that she had left home with the intention of spending the day in paying visits, old Septimus, in his turn, greatly astounded the horse, Henry, by putting whip to his back and starting him off at a pace he had never attempted before.

But before he got to the outer gate he was pulled up short, for here came Winny Wicket, throwing up her hands, and rolling toward them from the back premises

of the house, as fast as her little round body could move on.

"Wot yer want, Aunt Winny? Is anyfing forgot?" inquired Septimus, as he pulled up the horse, while his mistress fretted at the brief delay.

"Yes; somefin' is de matter! An' somefin' is forgot! Dough I ain't a-gwine to fall f'om grace 'bout it when I can run after you an' remedy it!" exclaimed the old woman, with an expression of injured innocence and outraged affection on her little plump black face.

"Well, wot is it?" pursued Septimus, while Mrs. Wolfsohn breathed fast with impatience.

"Why, dere's my young mist'ess dere running away widout so much as sayin' good-by to her po' ole Aunt Winny Wicket, an' me makin' a pot o' hot chocolate as fast as ebber I could to sarve to her along ob some o' my own cream cakes wot she used to like so well!"

"I am very sorry, Aunt Winny, but indeed I am obliged to hurry home, and I am in a very great hurry. Good-by," said Mrs. Wolfsohn, hastily and peremptorily.

Winny Wicket was standing right in front of the horse, and she never budged an inch farther or a moment sooner for the lady's words; on the contrary, she stood her ground, and went on to say:

"I know wot's druv you off! Dat ole wite snake has done stung you wid her stinger—wid her hissin' stinger ob a tongue!"

"'Snake'!" repeated Erma, confusedly. "I saw no snake."

"Oh, you know wot I mean, young mist'ess. If you don't, Sept does. Dat Adder Mash! I wish she was a ma'sh adder! I ain't got no use for snakes, nohow, an' wen dey's walkin' roun' on two legs, makin' mischief in famblies, den I perfeckly 'spises dem!"

At any other time Erma might have thought it her duty to gently admonish the old woman of her impropriety in speaking so disrespectfully of her master's guest, or governess, but her mind was too full of other thoughts now, so she only repeated:

"I am in a very great hurry, Aunt Winny; good-by."

"Yes, honey; an' she's been a-tryin' ebber since she been here by herse'f to marry my ole marster! He! he!

he! Only to fink of any woman luny enough to fink as she kin marry ole Marse Clemmy Gladden!"

"Good-by, Winny! I'm going. Go on, Septimus," exclaimed Mrs. Wolfsohn, authoritatively.

"Yes, honey, so is I presently. Hold up dere, Sept! Is yer gwine to drive right ober me an' kill me? Wot does yer mean?" cried Winny Wicket, keeping her ground, and forcing Septimus to pull up the horse again, whether he would or no, while she still continued:

"Yes, honey! An' even she 'scovered at long las' how it was so much loss time for her to be makin' lub to my ole marse, she turned her 'tention to Mr. Wally Lambe! Well, I reckon it is so long since any 'oman showed any prefference for ole Marse Wally, was de reason he tuk it all in! Umph, humph! Yer nebber see two sich ole fools as dese two is, in all yer born days! Young fools ain't nuffin' to em! Well, I reckon lub is like de whoopin' cough, and goes a heap harder wid ole people dan it do wid young ones! But dey mustn't let ole Miss Barbra Gunn get arter dem, I tell you, mist'ess! Lor'! I shouldn't wonder if Miss Barbra Gunn didn't take Marse Wally Lambe across her knee an' whip him good wid her slipper! An' Miss Barbra Gunn's slipper ain't nuffin' to be sneezed at in de way ob a carnal weepon, I tell you, young mist'ess! An' now, honey, I'm goin'. Good-by! An' you take my 'vice. Don't you fall from grace on 'count o' dat Adder Mash! She'll be a mash adder if ebber Miss Barbra Gunn put her foot down on top of her! Sept! Stop! If you dribe over me an' kill me you'll be put in plenatentiary for life, for 'mittin' suicide! Wait till I get outen de way. Dere! I'm goin' now. Good-by to you all."

And with this Winny Wicket cleared the track and rolled off toward home.

"Now, Septimus! Drive! Drive! Drive!" exclaimed Erma, in almost breathless impatience, as she sank back in her seat.

And the old coachman put whip to his horse and drove like the wind in a gale.

Up hill and down dale they drove without drawing rein to breathe the horse.

As they drew near Darkwood, Erma bent forward, and said:

"Stop at the overseer's cottage. I must speak to him."

And Septimus turned into the lane opening between the woods on the right and the orchard on the left, and leading straight up to and past Aleyn's house.

When they reached the gate, Erma told her coachman to remain on his seat, while she got out to go in the house.

She opened the little gate that was on the latch, and walked rapidly up the walk leading to the front door.

But it was fastened.

Then she looked up and saw that the window shutters were closed.

"He is not home!" she said, turning with a look of dismay to her old servant.

"Mist'ess, mebbe he is in de back premises. But yer kin tell by lookin' for de key. De key is unnerneaf ob de do'step, where he tell me allers to look for it wen I want anyfing an' he ain't home."

Before Septimus had finished speaking Erma had run her hand under the doorstep, and found the key. She quickly unlocked the door, and entered the house to see if there were any signs left behind to indicate the direction that the absent overseer had taken.

She found nothing of the sort. Every part of the house was in perfect order.

She had no reason to think that he had gone farther than the limits of the plantation, so when she came out and relocked the door, she beckoned her old coachman to get down from his seat and come to her.

He did so, wondering.

Then she said:

"Septimus, listen carefully to every word I say, and do not repeat a word of it to anyone but him to whom I send you. Do you hear?"

"Yes, mist'ess," replied the man, with his mouth and eyes all open.

"Leave me here to drive home alone. You go and look for Mr. Aleyn. He is in some of the fields. When you find him, take him aside where no one can hear you. Tell him not to come near his own cottage, nor our house, until I send for him. Tell him, I say, to conceal himself

in the thickest part of the woods; to take you with him to show the best place; and when he is safe, to send you back to tell me. Do you understand this, Septimus?"

"Yes, mist'ess; ebery word ob it."

"Listen further, then. When you have left Mr. Aleyn in the thickest part of the wood—where there is no path, mind you—come back to me; but don't say one word, nor make one sign, for your life, until you find me entirely alone!"

"Yes, mist'ess, I comprehends, an' I'll 'bey."

"Go, then, as fast as you can, and return as quickly."

Old Septimus set off at a brisk trot, while his mistress got into her carriage and drove homeward.

As she turned into the gate leading to her own house, she saw the mounted policeman before the door, both man and horse still as an equestrian statue.

Her heart sank within her.

Were they upon their quarry so soon, these blood-hounds of the law? Would he have time to escape? Or was he—might he be, by some evil chance, in the house, in the jaws of fate, at that moment?

The doubt almost took away her breath and stopped her heart's pulsations.

Staring straight before her in a panic of terror, she drove slowly up to the door, left the carriage and secured the horse, all in a mechanical manner, and then, in an awe-stricken tone, addressed the mounted stranger, asking his business there.

"I am watching the house for my chief, mum. He is inside, and will explain."

"Who—is—he? What does——" began Erma, in a fainting voice that dropped into silence.

But just then Minty came hurrying around from the rear of the house, and, joining her mistress, said:

"Now don't you be 'larmed, honey. It's all a pack o' nonsense. Sarchin' de house for a w'ite man! Some wilyun as has broke jail, I 'spects. 'Sif we was gwine to harbor any sich trash here! Jailbirds, indeed, at Darkwood!"

Minty's well-meant words did not tend to reassure Erma.

More dead than alive, the lady passed into the house.

She met the New York detective face to face, who, having finished his inspection of the upper regions of the building, had just descended the stairs, followed by his companion.

"Pray tell me, what has brought you to this house?" faltered Erma, as she sank down on one of the hall chairs.

"I came with a warrant to search the house for the escaped convict, Otho Herne, reported to be in this neighborhood."

"But why should you suppose him to be in this house?" inquired Erma, rather to hold the officer in conversation, to gain time for the fugitive to escape, than for any other reason.

"Jones, I think you had better answer this," said the New York officer to the county constable.

And that functionary came to the front, bowed, and said:

"Well, you see, Mrs. Wolfsohn—I beg pardon, mum, but I happen to know you, from having seen you at church so often with Mr. Wolfsohn, thought you mayn't know me."

"No," breathed Erma.

"Well, my name is John Jones, and I have been constable for the county these ten years or more. And sorry am I to come to this honored house on any such an errand, especially when the master is away and the mistress is here in an unprotected position, as one might say."

"Yes, I should have thought any magistrate might have hesitated to issue a warrant under such circumstances," sighed the lady.

"But the ends of justice, mum, must be served under all circumstances, however cruel and painful; besides, mum, this is a move that I think even you must approve of, when you hear that the man we are looking up is no other than the notorious Otho Herne, the murderer of Gustave Perlemonte, your husband's stepfather."

Erma shuddered, and with difficulty supported herself.

"Beg pardon for alluding to it, mum," said Mr. Jones, who mistook the exact cause of her emotion, believing her sympathies to be with the dead man only.

"Still," she faltered, "I cannot conceive why you should

search this house for the fugitive. This house would naturally seem to be the last on earth he would think of entering."

"Well, you see, mum, these fugitives from justice are very artful. They seek refuge in the last place anyone might think of searching for them. Maybe that is the reason why Otho Herne chose the house of the man he murdered."

"But what makes you think that he did choose this house? That is what is what I wish to know."

"Well, you see, mum, there was a report that a suspicious-looking stranger had engaged himself to you as an overseer, and Herne was known to be hiding in this neighborhood. Hence the suspicion that your overseer might be no other than Otho Herne."

"Yet, why look for him in my house? Is it likely that I should lodge my overseer under my own roof?"

"Beg pardon, mum; but it was said you really did," replied Mr. Jones.

"Oh, yes! For two days my overseer occupied a room in the garret, while his cottage was being prepared. I had for the moment forgotten the circumstance," said Erma, slightly flushing.

"Mr. Jones, we are losing time here! The man is not in this house, that is certain. We must search the other buildings on the premises and then scour the woods."

"Well, Mr. Smith, I am at your orders," replied Jones.

"Sorry to have annoyed a lady, but the law must take its course, mum," said the New York officer, politely.

"Very sorry, indeed, Mrs. Wolfsohn! But even you must approve of our course, seeing that it is your own father-in-law's murderer that we are trying to bring to justice," added Mr. Jones, with a bow.

Erma could not reply to either.

The two men bowed and left the house, followed by those whom they had left outside to watch the front and back doors.

Old Minty went to one of the front windows to watch them out of sight.

Erma threw her arms over the back of the chair and dropped her head upon them, in a collapse of despair.

She was roused by a light touch on her arm and a low voice in her ear.

She raised her head and saw Septimus standing before her. She put her finger to her lips as a sign of silence, and glanced toward Minty, who was standing with her back toward them and her face flattened against the window-panes, watching the retreat of the enemy.

Seeing this, Erma silently beckoned the old man, and softly led the way to the parlor, followed by old Septimus, walking on tiptoes, and holding his breath.

When they were alone in the farther corner of the room, Erma impetuously whispered:

"Did you find him? Did you place him in safety?"

"No, my dear mist'ess, I didn't find him. I couldn't find him. I went all ober de plantation, but he wa'n't nowhere to be found," replied the old man, regretfully.

"Then he is still wandering about the place, and may run right into the lion's mouth. Oh, Heaven, have pity on him!" groaned Erma.

"No, my dear mist'ess. He ain't on dis plantation. He ain't, indeed, else I should a found him. No, my mist'ess, he ain't, I knows it. 'Sides which——"

"Oh, you should not have returned without finding him and taking him to that place of safety in the woods I told you of. I did think I could trust you, Septimus!" wailed Erma, wringing her hands.

"An' so you could, mist'ess, 'cause I is trustwordy! An' I should a stayed an' sarched for him till I found him, only for wot I was gwine to 'splain, mist'ess——"

"Well—well, what?"

"While I was comin' up from de ribber meddow, I fell in 'long o' Miss Barbra Gunn's Jehial, and he say to me—he say:

"'Uncle Septimus, is yer new oberseer gone away for good?'

"An' I say to him—I say:

"'No. What make you ax?'

"And he ans'er back to me, he do, and he say to me—he say:

"'Why, 'cause I meeted him in de paff, comin' t'ro' de big woods, wid his great-coat ober his arm, an' his

umbrel' 'cross his shoulder, and his walleece in his hand, like a man gwine on a journey, dat's why.'

"So, mist'ess, when I heerd him say dat, I said: 'Mebbe yer's right,' an' I come right off to tell yer."

"Gone! Can it be possible? Can he have received any warning of the coming of those men?" questioned Erma of her own distracted mind.

Just then the voice of Minty was heard in the hall:

"Mist'ess, my mist'ess—whey is yer?"

"Here, Minty. Come in here," called out the lady.

The woman entered, and seeing her fellow-servant, exclaimed:

"You here, Septimus? Well, yer mus' be starved. But yer dinner's ready in de kitchen, ef de mist'ess will 'scuse yer."

"Certainly. Go, Septimus," said Erma.

"I wanted to get rid ob him on purpose," said Minty, when the old man had left the room. Then, drawing the letter of Aleyn from her pocket, she handed it to her mistress, saying: "I been a-waitin' till dey was all outen de way 'fore gibbin' dis to yer, honey, 'cause he tole me not to let anybody see me 'liver it to yer."

"Who told you?" inquired Erma, as she received the letter.

"Marse Oberseer Aleyn, honey. He's gone, honey! Went away 'fore dem horse-marines come prancin' 'roun' de place. An' he gib me dis letter to gib to yer private. He say how de letter will 'splain all."

Erma broke the seal of the letter, and read eagerly.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A STORM IN THE MARSH.

> Those hearts that start at once into a blaze
> And open all their rage, like summer storms
> At once discharged, grow cool and calm again.
> —JOHNSON.

It was the Saturday of the same week that had seen the flight of James Aleyn, the mysterious overseer, from Darkwood—not from before the face of pursuing justice, as many people believed, but from goading remorse, as

his farewell letter explained to Mrs. Wolfsohn; he could not remain in the house of the murdered man, and so had left it—left it at once, as soon as he had learned whose property it had been; and he had gone without risking a final and exciting interview with his employer, and gone in time to elude the officers of justice, of whose presence in the county he was, however, unconscious.

On this glorious Saturday, in the most glorious month of the year—October—Miss Barbra Gunn sat in her favorite flag-bottomed armchair, in the middle of her own room, on the ground floor of the old house, having her gray hair combed out by her maid, Minny, who stood behind her.

A roaring fire of pine kindlings and oak logs blazed in the yawning fireplace at the end of the room, on her left; but she sat facing the open door, into which the slanting beams of the low afternoon sun shone warmly on the clean, bare boards of the floor and far across on the whitewashed wall to the left of the fireplace.

Miss Barbra's mind was in a little perplexity, being occupied by three separate sets of her cares—the state of her winter apples gathered that day; the scandal at the new overseer's flight from Darkwood; and the folly of Cousin Wally Lambe's devotion to Miss Mesh.

The confusion of her thoughts, however, did not prevent Miss Barbra Gunn from keeping a sharp lookout through the open door upon that sunny lawn, where old Jehial was lazily raking the fallen leaves from the grass plot.

On the porch of the new house directly opposite to her, sat Fleurie and Eustace Fleetwood and Bab Bibb, arranging autumn leaves which they had collected for pressing.

With all children's indifference to awkwardness of attitude and inconvenience in work, they stooped sideways, arranging the leaves on the same bench upon which they sat.

Miss Barbra was not seeing or thinking of them. Uppermost in her thoughts then, gaining a momentary supremacy over the subject of specked apples and fugitive overseer, were the sentiments of disgust and abhorrence at the sins of omission and commission set down to the

account of Mr. Walter Lambe. He had neglected his duties as farm manager all this week, and he had dangled after Miss Ada Mesh instead.

Suddenly Miss Barbra called out to her old servant:

"Jehial."

Jehial jumped—he always did jump when his mistress spoke to him suddenly—touched his old rimless black hat, leaned on his rake and listened respectfully.

"Where's your Marse Wally? I have not seen him since breakfast time. He didn't come home to dinner, and now it is almost sunset. Do you know where he is?"

"He's gone somewhere, mist'ess," replied the old man, again touching his hat.

"I know that, pumpkin head! But where has he gone?"

" 'Deed, I dunno, mist'ess."

"When did he go, then? Who saw him go? How did he go—on horseback, or on foot? Very queer, his going out just after breakfast, to be gone all day without saying a word to me of his purpose," said Miss Gunn, with one of those strange premonitions of evil that "come like shadows, so depart."

"I tell yer all 'bout it, mist'ess. Yer know 'rectly arter breakfas' yer ris' up an' went down to de winter-apple orchard—and——"

"Well, if I know that, you blockhead, what's the use in telling me? Tell me something I don't know, or hold your foolish tongue! Tell me about Walter Lambe's doings," exclaimed Miss Gunn.

"Yes, mist'ess, which I was comin' reg'lar to dat same. Soon as ebber yer lef' de breakfas' table an' went out, while I was still watin' dere, Marse Wally ris up an' went up to his room, an' arter all de young ladies had gone to take a walk up to Marse Curious Bibb's, an' de coas' was clear, he comes downstairs, he do, all dress' up in his Sunday clo'se, wid hat brush' smoove, an' his boots polish', an' w'ite gloves on his han's, an' a f'esh, w'ite nosegay in his button'ole."

"Where could the old fool have been going? To take the other old fool to the church fair at Ice Cliff, I suppose," put in Miss Barbra.

"An' he orders ob me, so he does—does Marse Wally

Lambe—to get de new harness out, an' put Flora to de gig, an' brush de same out, an' wash it off careful. W'ich I did, mist'ess, an' den he got into it an' druv off."

"Oh, yes! I see it all! Gone to take his old maid to the fair! But how dare you, you stupid donkey, to harness up my gig and horse at his orders?" demanded Miss Gunn, so sharply and suddenly that the old man sprang a foot from the ground before he answered:

"Lors-a-messy on my po' old brack soul an' body, old mist'ess, yer nebber ferbidded me f'om 'beyin' de orders ob Marse Wally Lambe! Quite contrary-wise to de oppersition ob dat, yer ordered me to 'bey his orders."

"That was when he came here years ago, and had some little grains of sense left in his addled brain! Don't answer me back, you noodle! And don't obey any farther orders of Wally Lambe without first referring to me, at your peril! Do you hear?"

"Yes, mist'ess."

"The old idiot! He has gone to take the other idiot a-fairing! What can they expect will ever come of their courting? No marriage, certainly. He has not a dollar of his own, and I will venture to say that she has not fifty laid by. Neither of them has either employment that they could pursue or a home they could occupy after marriage! Well, poor idiots! They'll soon find out that 'dancing bears must pay for their airs.' What in the demon are you standing there staring at, you jolter-headed, owl-eyed, shark-mouthed dunce? Get to your work!" stormed Miss Barbra at the astounded old negro, who sprang as if he had been galvanized, and struck out with his rake.

Meanwhile the nimble hands of Minny had combed out and wound up her mist'ess' gray hair, put on the false front of black bands, set on the black silk skull cap to cover the gray, and surmounted the whole with the high-topped, long-eared, wide-bordered book-muslin cap that crowned and completed Miss Gunn's elaborate and imposing headgear.

"There, now, that will do!" said Miss Barbra, rising and smoothing down the front of her black bombazet gown.

But at that moment old Jehial approached the door,

holding in one hand his hat and in the other a letter, which he offered to his mistress with a bow.

"Where did this come from? Who brought it here?" she sharply demanded.

"A boy f'om de bridge tollgate fotch it, an' said how dere warn't no answer, and runned away again quick as lightnin', like he was afeared some answer mought be sent whedder or no."

But before the old man had finished speaking, Miss Gunn had seized the letter, recognized the handwriting and seated herself again in her chair.

"From Wally Lambe! Now, what has that old zany got to say to me which he could not speak to my face, I would like to know! To ask my consent to his ridiculous suit, I suppose! I won't give it! There! I'd see him burned at the stake first!" savagely exclaimed Miss Gunn, as she opened the letter.

There she read an announcement that must have made her hair stand on end, if it had not been tightly bound down and closely capped.

Indignation, rage, fury prompted her to tear the letter into shreds and throw it into the fire; but curiosity conquered them all and compelled her to continue the reading, though not without interrupting herself with many a savage interjection and exterminating threat.

Cousin Wally Lambe's exasperating letter was as follows:

"Bridge Tollgate, Saturday Morning.

"My Dear Cousin Barbra: I write to announce the most important transaction of my life, and to which I should have previously asked your consent and approval, if I had not felt that you would never give it, and feared that the mention of it would give you one of your dreadful turns. And now, my dear cousin, I have written thus much to prepare you for the news which I hope will not take you much by surprise, or make your heart thump up in the back of your head, especially when I am not on tne spot to regulate the circulation by blood-letting. We are married!"

"Married! Actually married!" shrieked Miss Barbra, in a paroxysm of fury. "That old lunatic, without a dol-

lar to bless himself with, married! I'll have him caught and clapped into a straightjacket and sent to the madhouse, I'll be hanged if I don't!"

Just then Minny, who was listening with her mouth and eyes both wide open, slipped out to run and be the first to announce this astounding news to the young ladies, who were all amusing themselves in the parlor of the new house.

With an effort, Miss Gunn recovered calmness enough to go on with her reading:

"Yes, Cousin Barbra, my beloved Ada and myself were united in the holy bonds of matrimony at eleven o'clock this morning, in St. James's Church, Ice Cliff, by the Rev. Dr. Cleveland."

"Married!" burst forth Miss Barbra again. "An old madman! A very dangerous maniac! Yes, I'll have him put under a shower bath and pumped on for twenty-four hours, and then I'll have him put in a dark cell and kept on bread and water for twenty days! That will bring down his youthful ardor, I reckon! Married to that penniless adventuress! I'll have her taken up and committed to jail as an adventuress! I'll be hanged if I don't. And for old Dr. Cleveland to be such a drotted donkey as to marry those two beggars! I'll denounce him to the House of Bishops! I will, as sure as my name is Barbra Gunn! I'll denounce him to the House of Bishops, and have him ungowned and deposed from the pulpit. Satan fetch me if I don't! Old Wally Lambe and Ada Mesh! What could the miserable ninnies be thinking of? Where do they expect to live? Who is to keep them? They shall smart for it! Ay, they shall!"

Miss Barbra Gunn was so absorbed in her own emotions that she did not notice the quiet stealing into the room of four or five giggling girls and one mocking boy—all brought by Minny—and who quietly ensconsed themselves in various parts of the dusky room, for the sun had now set, and even the fire was burning without blazing.

Curiosity again overcame indignation, and compelled Miss Gunn to read on, unconscious of the watchful young eyes upon her:

"Ours was not a runaway match, my dear Cousin Barbra. My beloved Ada and myself are both quite superior to such clandestine proceedings."

"Now, I should like to know whom the pitiful idiots imagined they had to run away from?" sneered Miss Gunn, as she continued to read the obnoxious letter:

"Cousin Barbra, we acted openly and aboveboard. I took the gig and horse, and drove to Brighthome in broad daylight to claim my bride."

"Ah! now I have the old thief. I'll prosecute him at the criminal court for stealing my horse and gig, and have him sent to the State prison for ten years! I will, as sure as my name is Barbra Gunn!" swore the amazon, doubling her fist and shaking it at the empty air. But she read on:

"My beloved Ada did not keep me waiting long, but soon came down, looking lovely in her beautiful gray silk—bought for the occasion—and her white shawl—Parsley, or something—and her white bonnet and feathers, and veil and gloves, like a heavenly angel——"

"Ugh! That makes me sicker than a dose of tartar emetic," interjected Miss Gunn.

"And leading in her hand little Fance Fleetwood, who was to be her bridesmaid, and escorted by the venerable Mr. Clement Gladden, who, at her request, consented to attend us to the church and give the bride away."

"So old Clemmy Gladden's in it, too, is he? He ought to be ashamed of himself—ashamed of himself! I'll have him indicted for conspiracy! I will! I'll have the whole pack of them in jail or in a madhouse before twenty-four hours are over their heads! I'll be hanged if I won't!" fumed the old lady, boiling over with fury. But she read on:

"And then the one-horse carriage was driven up beside my gig by Jugurtha, who jumped out and held the reins. Mr. Gladden placed little Fance with me in the gig, and then helped Miss Mesh into the little carriage, got into

the seat beside her, and said, with a pleasant smile, that this was etiquette, and that we could exchange companions after the ceremony was over. And so we drove off to the church, Mr. Gladden's carriage, with himself and the bride, taking precedence, as was proper—my gig, with myself and little Fance, following. And that angelic child was so unselfishly delighted that I was going to marry Miss Mesh and take her away for good! I always knew children were little innocents, but I never thought they were such angels."

"Ha! ha! ha! Ho! ho! ho!" exploded Miss Gunn, in a roar of laughter. "He is the silliest ninny! Couldn't see that the poor child was only glad to get rid of the cross old cat of a Mesh! Well, let us see how he goes on."

"And so, dear Cousin Barbra, we drove to the church, where Dr. Cleveland, in his surplice, and the sexton, in his Sunday clothes, awaited us at the altar. And then we were married, my adored Ada deporting herself all through the ceremony with a graceful blending of modesty and dignity, little Fance behaving beautifully as bridesmaid, and Mr. Gladden acting his part of church father with all the stately courtesy of the good old school —that, alas! I fear will pass away with him and me. When the ceremony was over, and the marriage registered—and I saw Mr. Clement Gladden slip a generous fee into the hand of the minister, and he thought I didn't see him do it, but I did—we took leave of Dr. Cleveland and the sexton, and set out to return to Brighthome, for Mr. Gladden insisted that we should. I handed my honored wife, Mrs. Walter Lambe, into my gig, and got in and took the reins, while Mr. Gladden put little Fance in the one-horse carriage, and placed himself beside her, and led the way, we following. And so we got back to Brighthome, where a sumptuous feast, prepared by the housekeeper, awaited us. I confess that all this sympathetic co-operation and cordial hospitality took me with a pleasant surprise; for I had expected nothing better than to drive quietly to church with my bride in the gig beside me and be married in the most unostentatious manner. Well, when the wedding feast was over, and we had taken a grateful leave of our host, I handed my

wife into my gig and drove off—Aunt Winny Wicket throwing an old shoe after us for good luck, and little Fance dancing and clapping her hands with rapture—dear, little, sympathetic angel! And so we drove down to the tollgate house at the bridge, where I have been writing this letter that I am about to finish and send off to you to break the news of our marriage, and to prepare you for our arrival. We expect to be at The Marsh about seven o'clock this evening."

If you had seen Miss Barbra Gunn's eyes when she read this cool announcement! For a moment she could not speak at all, but glared around with flaming orbs that threatened to set the house on fire.

"Coming here!" at last she choked and spluttered. "Coming here, to sit down on top of me? Oh, the intolerable impudence! They are mad! There is no sort of doubt about it. Coming here, indeed! Let 'em come! I dare 'em to come! I'll give 'em a wedding reception, I will! Such a wedding reception as they never had before. I'll send them packing out of my house with a nest of hornets about their ears and a pack of hounds at their heels! Coming here, are they? Well, I'm glad of it! I wouldn't miss their coming here for anything in the world! Whir-r-r-r-r! Won't they go whizzing off this place in about half an hour after they have appeared! But stop! The lunatic has written another half page here. Let's see. Oh! his future plans, it seems! Yes, by all means we will find out what they are!"

And she resumed the letter:

"You, my dear Cousin, Barbra, you who have been so kind a friend and benefactress to me, have a right to know what our future plans are. They are as follows: First, to come to you and spend a few months—say until Christmas; then visit Cousin Nelly Morset, and stay with her folks until Easter; then pay our respects to Gen. Bibb, and stay until Whitsuntide; then call on Cousin Erma Wolfsohn, and remain until the fourth of July; from there proceed to Brighthome, and spend the rest of the summer and part of the autumn with Mr. Gladden, until the middle of October, which will complete the first year of our wedded life, and the circle of our visiting

friends. In that time some favorable change of fortune may have taken place. If it shall not have done so, why, we must go to you again for another three months, and so begin anew our yearly round of visits until it does. And so, by visiting our dear friends in rotation every year, we can make it so delightful, by doing them a pleasure and ourselves a benefit at the same time, and, in fact, we shall do exceedingly well, until we can do better. Don't you see it in this light, my dear Cousin Barbra? Don't you see?"

"Oh, yes, I see!" scornfully exclaimed the old lady, flying into a worse passion than she had yet exhibited, bounding from her seat, tearing the still unfinished letter into shreds and flinging it into the fire. "Coming here for three months, are they? Coming here! Oh, how glad I am! Won't I give them a warm reception? Oh! won't I give them just the warmest reception a pair of fools ever had in all their lives! Ah! I'll scald him with boiling water, and set her clothes on fire, and hunt them off the premises in a blaze of fire, pursued by a pack of bloodhounds! Let 'em come on. Ah-h-h!"

And she snorted like a war horse that scents the battle afar off.

"Aunt Barbra! Aunt Barbra! For Heaven's sake, what is the matter with you?" cried Bab Bibb, coming out of her corner, followed by all the other girls and the monkey boy, all of whom gathered around the infuriated old lady.

"What! Haven't you heard the news? Don't you know that helpless old nincompoop, Wally Lambe, has married that strolling beggar, Ada Mesh, and that they are coming here?" demanded Miss Gunn.

"Indeed, are they, Aunt Barbra? Oh, how charming!" exclaimed Bab Bibb. "They shall have the best bedroom over the front parlor of the new house. Come, Flurry Fleetwood, and help me to fix it up for them. We will get out the ruffled linen pillow slips and the silk patchwork quilt that took the prize at the Industrial Fair, and we will——"

"Hold your tongue, Bab Bibb!" exclaimed the exasperated old lady, as soon as she could speak for amaze-

ment at the girl's effrontery. "Pray, are you cracked, as well as all the rest? Begone! Get out of my sight before you drive me clean mad!"

Giggling like a little idiot, Bab slunk away into a dark corner, beckoning Fleurie to follow her.

Miss Gunn continued to fire away desperate and destructive threats of what she was going to do to the deluded lovers.

But the violence of her passion was evidently exhausting itself, and after a little while her terrible denunciations ended in the anti-climax:

"At any rate, I will certainly send them away."

"'Send them away'?" spoke up Rose Bibb for the first time. "Who ever heard of such a thing? Send away a bride and groom who were coming to spend their honeymoon with you as their nearest relation, who has the first right to their company? You, a lady, would never do that!"

"Rose Bibb, you are a fool!" was Miss Gunn's complimentary comment.

"But really, you know, Aunt Barbra, you cannot send any lady and gentleman away who come to make you a visit, under any circumstances, and especially under these."

"What! after they have gone off and got married without my consent?"

"As they had a perfect right to do. They did you no wrong, showed you no disrespect in omitting to ask your consent. They are middle-aged people, responsible to no one," said Rose.

"Now, if it had been one of us," added Lily, "who had gone off and got married without consulting you, you might have been right in refusing to receive the culprit. But this is quite a different case, you know."

"Oh, Aunt Barbra!" recommenced Rose, "do, do be kind to the poor things. Who will be so if you are not? Where will they put their heads on their wedding night if you refuse to shelter them?" pleaded Rose.

"And, oh! do, do let us have some glorious fun out of the old bride and groom. Give them a cordial reception to-night, and a wedding party next week, and invite all the neighborhood," coaxed Lily, with her arms around

Miss Barbra's neck, and her lips hovering over the old lady's incipient mustache.

Miss Gunn loved her nieces, and loved to be coaxed; besides, she was really very generous, notwithstanding the insanity of her temper, which had now spent its paroxysm.

And so the prospect seemed to promise peace.

CHAPTER XXX.

PREPARING FOR THE HAPPY COUPLE.

Friends, you are very welcome to our house.
This must appear in other ways than words,
Therefore we scant this breathing courtesy.
—SHAKESPEARE.

They'll live together as most people do,
Suffering each other's foibles by accord,
And not exactly either one or two.—BYRON.

"Come, Flurry," whispered Bab, pulling her friend out of the room.

Then, as they were crossing the plank path leading to the porch of the new house, Bab said:

"Now, let's go and fix up that room all the same."

"What! Oh, she would kill us! She's in an awful passion! She'll never let them come here!" answered the trembling Fleurie.

"Never mind; we'll fix up the room, all the same, and trust in Providence."

"And I'll help you, girls, and take the consequences," gallantly volunteered young Eustace, who had followed close behind them.

"You! Who ever heard of a boy—any boy—much less a monkey, like you—helping to decorate a bride's chamber?" scornfully inquired his sister, as they all entered the new house.

"Yes, but he shall help us, Flurry. You shall help us, Rooster. You can be of great use," exclaimed Bab Bibb, as they went into the parlor, where there was a fine fire burning on the hearth, and spermaceti candles, in silver-plated candlesticks, lighted on the mantelpiece.

"Na-a-a, Miss Flurry! You see I can do something in the cause!" cried Eustace, in mocking triumph.

"What can you do?" slightingly inquired Fleurie.

"Oh, he can be of real service!" exclaimed Bab, answering for her little knight. "You see, I don't want to call on any of the poor servants, for fear of getting them into a row with Aunt Barbra. But Rooster is not in her power, and so he can bring up the hickory logs and pine cones to make a rousing fire in the best spare room. Go, now, Rooster, and do it. Never mind getting sawdust and splinters all over your Sunday clothes. I'll brush them off for you myself."

"All right! The wood pile is at the east end of the old house, isn't it?"

"Yes. Bring a great, sound, green oak log for the back, Rooster."

"All right!" again exclaimed the delighted monkey, bounding away on his congenial errand.

Bab took one of the lighted candles from the mantelpiece and led the way upstairs to the large room over the parlor.

There she lighted two other candles that stood upon the mantelpiece, put the one she carried on the shelf between them, took a bunch of keys from its hiding place behind a looking glass, and opened a cedar chest that contained the treasures of bed linen laid up in lavender by the careful hands of Miss Gunn's Minny.

And from that sacred receptacle Bab's profane fingers removed fine Irish linen sheets, Shetland lamb's-wool blankets, and a rich patchwork silk quilt, in its most elaborate workmanship a very marvel of patient industry.

"Oh, my! what a splendid quilt!" exclaimed Fleurie, whose eyes were fairly dazzled by the brilliancy of its innumerable bright colors. "But she'll take our lives if we put that on the bed for them! Besides, what's the use of fixing up the room, anyhow? She says she won't let them enter her gates! She says she'll set the dogs on them, and hunt them off the plantation to-night, and to-morrow morning she'll have the whole party put into jail, or into a madhouse!"

"And do you think she can do it, Flurry Fleetwood? Or do you think she would do it, even if she could?" demanded Bab.

"She swears she will!"

"Yes; and the more she swears she will, the more she won't. Now, look here, Flurry! I know Aunt Barbra better than you do! She's not hateful; she's only quick-tempered! The harder she curses, and swears, and threatens—and, oh, she does that awfully, sometimes—the softer her heart gets after it's all over; I never knew Aunt Barbra to do anything she threatened to do in a passion yet! Why, if she had, don't you see she would have been hanged ever so long ago, and we all disgraced?"

"Well, anyway, if she don't hunt the bride and groom off the plantation with hounds, at least she will refuse to to let them enter her doors. I know that!"

"No, she won't! You'll see. I have come away and left Ro and Lil there, on purpose to talk her over, after her passion is over. She'll come round. She'll make it up with them. She'll forgive them, if there is any offense to be forgiven, which I don't see, for my part. And when Aunt Barbra does forgive, she does it grandly. We'll have a sumptuous wedding reception, my dear, somewhere about the middle of next week, mark my words," said Bab, nodding her head with an air of wisdom.

"The Lord grant it!" solemnly but doubtfully drawled Fleurie.

"That's you, Rooster! You're a trump!" exclaimed Bab, as the boy came in, dragging a huge hickory wood log big enough for a Yule log. "Lay it carefully at the back, and run and bring up some smaller ones and some pine cones for kindling."

The delighted imp obeyed her directions, while she, having laid out on the floor all the treasures that she required, carefully locked the chest and arose from her knees, saying:

"Now, Flurry, come and help me to make up the bed. There's nothing on it now, you know, but those white Marseilles pillow shams and the counterpane."

"Oh! I just know we will get into an awful row with Miss Barbra. And—I want to go home," said poor Fleurie, desperately frightened and almost ready to weep.

"Well, you can't go home this time o' night, anyhow! So you will have to stay and see the weddingers return, and so you might as well help me to fix up for them," said

Bab, beginning to take off the pillows and the counterpane from the bed.

Fleurie went to assist her under protest.

Eustace came in with more wood and kindling, and soon made a fine fire that blazed up the chimney, shone on the bright brass andirons and fender and lighted up the whole room.

"Now, Rooster, that is done splendidly! Now sweep up the hearth neatly with that little hair broom, and then go downstairs and bring up a large, full pail of spring water and fill these ewers," said Bab, who had completed the decorations of the bed by the addition of the brilliant silk quilt and ruffled pillow slips, and was now unfolding and hanging fine damask towels on the toilet rack.

Away went Eustace on his errand. He soon returned and filled the large ewers and took the empty pail to carry away, when again Bab spoke to him.

"Now go down, Eustace, and gather some white chrysanthemums and bring them here to fill the vases. Oh! how I wish we had some roses; but they are all gone!"

Off sped the willing lad again, and again returned bearing handfuls of the rich, white autumn flowers, which Bab put in little vases and set upon the mantelpiece and upon the old-fashioned, white-draped dressing table.

"Now all is ready here. Come, Flurry! come downstairs and help me to get out the best china and the silver set, and set the table in the dining room here in the new house. And we will get out the quince preserves and the green sweetmeats, and the pound cake and plum cake that Aunt Barbra had made for her Sunday's company. And, oh! won't we lay a supper!" said Bab, as she ran down into the back parlor, with the best damask tablecloth over her arm and a dozen napkins to match in her hands.

"Oh, Bab! she'll massacre us!" cried Fleurie in dismay at these newly proposed depredations.

Bab Bibb scarcely heard this objection. She returned to the leaping and dancing monkey of a boy, and said:

"Now, Rooster, my fine fellow, while we are setting the table I want you to go into the kitchen to Aunt Aggy, the cook, and tell her who is coming home here to supper—Mr. and Mrs. Walter Lambe; and——"

"Oh, it's no good telling her! She knows it! They all

know it! Every one of them! The news is all over the plantation! And everybody expects there'll be ever such a row when they do come!" said Master Eustace.

"Well, then, everybody will be disappointed. There will be no row; or rather, no more row. The row is over, or will be by the time the happy pair arrives. But now you do my errand, like a brave boy, as you are," said Bab.

"Oh, I'm not afraid!" Eustace declared.

"Well, then, go to Aggy and tell her to put back supper for an hour, and to make some potato cakes and rice waffles, and broil those reed birds and ortolans that Aunt Barbra had hung up in the cellar for Sunday."

"But," said the boy, dubiously, "suppose she asks me who sent me?"

"Tell her I sent you to say that Aunt Barbra says she must do so," replied Bab.

"Oh, Lor', Miss Barbra didn't say it, though!" exclaimed Fleurie.

Well, she will say it, and wish that she had said it sooner! Go, do as I bid you, Rooster, and then run back here," commanded Bab.

The boy sped off like a footracer.

"Oh, Lor', Bab, she'll murder us! She will, indeed!" exlaimed Fleurie.

"Help me to straighten this tablecloth. You stand on the other side," was Bab's irrelevant answer.

When the two girls had finished laying the cloth and arranging the table, they were about to leave the new house, when they met Eustace returning from his last errand.

"Now, then, Bab, what next?" he inquired.

"'Now, then' you must go and watch for the weddingers, and as soon as you see or hear their gig coming, you must run in and tell us before they are seen by Miss Barbra, so we may go out and welcome them. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," said the boy, with mock reverence.

And out he went

"Now, Flurry, we must go to the old house, and go in by the back door, and run upstairs to our room to fix ourselves."

Accordingly they went, and as they passed the back

door of Miss Gunn's room, which was near the foot of the stairs, they heard that thunderbolt of war still in strife with her two elder nieces.

Bab and Fleurie improved their toilets by brushing their hair and putting on clean collars and cuffs; and then tney stole downstairs and out of the back door to return to the new house.

In doing so, they still heard voices in Miss Gunn's room in high argument.

"You see, it isn't settled yet," whispered Fleurie, trembling.

"But it will be," replied Bab, laughing.

At that moment Eustace came rushing toward them.

"What's the matter, Rooster?" inquired Bab.

"Cuck-cuck-cuck-cuck-a-doo-dle-doo!" crowed Rooster, to keep up his character. "Hurrah! Hurrah! They've come!"

At the same moment the sound of wheels was heard bowling through the gate.

The two girls, Bab giggling and Fleurie trembling, hastened into the front hall of the new house, which was lighted by a hanging lamp, to receive the wedded pair.

And there they stood waiting in the open door, while Eustace swung over the railings of the portico outside.

The gig drew up, and Cousin Wally alighted, and with clumsy carefulness handed out his bride.

The light of the hall lamp shone through the open door full upon them. The round, innocent, old face of Cousin Wally, beaming with satisfaction at having won his wife, and with confidence of receiving a kind welcome from his relations; the ague-stricken face of the ex-Miss Mesh, paler and sharper than ever, as she trembled with something more than a malarial chill.

"Oh! Walter dear, I am so frightened!" the lady was heard to whisper.

"Never mind, my love. There has been a row, no doubt; but the niggers and the family have got the worst of it, I reckon! And it is over now. I gave her time, you know," was the gentleman's response.

"Hurray! Cuck-a-doodle-doo!" shouted Eustace, by way of a welcome, as he sprang down the porch steps to meet them.

"How do, Rooster? Hold the horse, till one of the men comes up! Say! Cousin Barbra's cussed the roof of the house, hasn't she?" whispered the bridegroom.

"No! 'cause it is a strong, old-fashioned roof! But if it had been a modern Mansard roof, it would have been blown to the North Star. She's cussed some," said the lad, as he went to the horse's head.

"I knew it! Is it over now?" questioned Cousin Wally, beginning to hesitate.

"The heavy cannonading ceased about five minutes ago. I think there is a light firing kept up still. Even the wind, you know, can't blow a hurricane forever," replied Eustace, somewhat mixing his metaphors.

The beaming confidence of Cousin Wally's face somewhat faded as he led his bride into the hall, where they were received by Bab Bibb, with both hands held out, and exclaiming:

"Oh, Cousin Wally, this is such a jolly go! How do you do, Miss Mesh! Oh, beg pardon, Mrs. Walter Lambe! I wish you both joy, with all my heart! And so does Flurry Fleetwood here, only she's too bashful to say it."

And with this the warm-hearted Bab kissed the blue lips of the bride and the old baby face of the bridegroom.

"Whe—where is Cousin Barbra?" inquired the latter.

"Oh! she is in the old house. There is so much to attend to, you know, on such a sudden occasion as this. Now, come right in, both of you," said Bab, cordially, leading the way into the lighted parlor.

"She—she expected us?" inquired the bridegroom, whose confidence was fast oozing away.

"Oh, yes; but she doesn't know that you have arrived yet. I will tell her presently," cheerfully replied Bab, drawing two armchairs toward the fire, and then inquiring: "Now, will you sit down here, or would you prefer to go at once to your room to lay off your wraps?"

"I will go up, if you please. I would like to lay off my bonnet. And will you be kind enough to let some one bring in my traveling bag?" said the lady, quite meekly for her.

"Oh! yes. Flurry, you go. Rooster is holding the

horse. You go and fetch Miss Mes—Mrs. Lambe's bag from the gig, and follow us upstairs with it. You know the room. Come, ma'am, I'll show you the way," said Bab, conducting the bride up to her chamber.

Cousin Wally remained, pacing uneasily up and down the parlor floor.

Fleurie passed through the hall with the bride's bag, and carried it upstairs.

Soon after this Eustace came into the parlor, and stood grinning with delight.

"What made you leave the horse?" inquired Cousin Wally, pausing in his anxious walk.

"'Cause I was tired of holding him. So I got in the gig and drove him around to the stable, and left gig and horse in the hands of old Jehial to be put up. And wasn't that the right thing to do, anyhow?" was the straightforward and practical reply of the lad.

"Oh! yes; I suppose so."

Thus the bridal pair were warmly welcomed and waited upon by the three children.

In a few moments the bride came down, attended by Bab Bibb and Fleurie Fleetwood.

They throned her in honor in the great armchair, and seated themselves on either side.

This grouping was scarcely completed when the sound of footsteps and low voices was heard coming in at the front door and along the passage, and it was soon followed by the entrance of Miss Barbra Gunn and her two elder nieces, in full dress.

The aguish bride turned pale and shook.

The bridegroom stopped short in his stumpy walk, and looked as if he wished to sink through the floor.

But Miss Gunn advanced toward him with all the self-possession and dignified politeness that distinguished her when she was not deranged by a paroxysm of passion.

"Well, Cousin Walter," she began, "you have certainly given us a very great surprise, not to say shock. You should, at least, have informed us of the honor you intended to confer upon us. However, I forgive you. I forgive you."

And she shook hands with him, and then with the bride, adding:

"I wish you both much happiness and—more wisdom."

Poor old Wally burst into tears that streamed down his innocent, childish face, as he seized his relative's hand and kissed it, saying:

"Oh, Cousin Barbra! This goodness! This kindness! This kindness! This goodness!"

That was all he could say, but he said it over a great many times, and would have said it over a great many more, if she had not turned away from him with an impatient laugh.

Meanwhile Rose and Lily had been welcoming the bride.

Bab was triumphant. Fleurie's eyes were like two shining stars. Eustace was leaping and dancing with delight in the corner.

"All went merry as a marriage bell."

The impromptu wedding feast was held half an hour later, and everyone enjoyed it.

But the startling events of the day were not yet over.

It was after tea, when they were sitting around the parlor fire, that Miss Barbra Gunn was beckoned from the room by her maid, Minny.

At the hall door, the old lady found Septimus from Darkwood.

"What do you want, old man?" she asked.

"Oh, mist'ess! Please come over to our house," he said, wringing his hands with distress.

"At this hour of the night! Why, what on earth is the matter?" demanded Miss Gunn.

"Oh! madam, it is my young mist'ess! For de lub ob de Lord, come to her quickly!"

"Is it about that overseer?"

"Oh, no, mist'ess! Somefin else."

CHAPTER XXXI.

STARTLING NEWS.

Not one care-wanting hour my life had tasted;
But from the very instant of my birth,
Incessant woes my tired heart hath wasted,
And my poor thoughts are ignorant of mirth.
Look how one wave another still pursueth.
When some great tempest holds their troops in chase,
Or as one hour another close reneweth,
Or posting day supplies another's place;
So do the billows of affliction beat me,
And hand in hand the storms of mischief go,
Successive cares with utter ruin threat me,
Grief is enchained with grief, and woe with woe.
—BRANDON.

We must return to Darkwood, and to the moment when Erma Wolfsohn opened the letter of the fugitive overseer.

It seemed a strange letter for a hired man to write to his lady employer. It was without date or signature, and it ran as follows:

"MY DEAREST ERMA: I feel sure that you cannot put yourself in my position, nor ever could have done so, or you would never have brought me to this place, once the property and home of the late ill-starred Gustave Perlemonte.

"For the same reason you cannot enter into the state of my feelings on making the discovery this morning that I was on his land, a refugee in his house.

"A murderer flying from justice, hiding himself in the home of the murdered man, and all unconsciously!

"Oh, Erma! Was ever the irony of fate more cruel?

"Why, when I found his deguerreotype on your table I was shocked beyond expression. Yet you never told me the relation he bore to your husband, or to the place. How you parried my questions I have forgotten. You told me no falsehood, I know, for you are truth itself.

"Yes, two points I do remember. When I asked you if the original of that picture was a friend of your hus-

band, you answered most emphatically that he was not. When I asked who brought that picture into the house, you said you did not know. And you threw it into the hottest part of the fire, where it was quickly burned up.

"Your words and actions left me with the impression that this man was not a friend, nor even a valued acquaintance, of the family into which you had married. And this may all have been true in the case of a second husband and stepfather, who might have turned out to be something very obnoxious to wife and son.

"But—it left me without any suspicions of the real state of the case.

"You cannot judge my feelings when the truth was accidentally made known to me. Your old servant, Minty, having missed the picture from its place, and searched for it in vain, came to me to make inquiries, describing the daguerreotype, and telling me at the same time that it was the only remaining picture of her master's, Rodolph Wolfsohn's, stepfather.

"Erma! I was so shocked at first hearing that Perlemonte was the stepfather of your husband, and the master of the house into which I had fled for refuge, that I could not understand or believe it.

"But when by questions I learned the whole truth, and comprehended the situation, there was but one course for me—to leave the premises immediately. To remain here an hour after I have learned the truth, would be to profane the place.

"Erma! Because each moment I remain here is a desecration to the ground, and because I cannot risk the excitement and distress which a personal interview and leavetaking would entail upon us both, I bid you adieu now and thus, leaving my blessing with you as I go, praying for you while I live, if the blessings and prayers of a penitent sinner can avail you."

This was all.

Erma finished the reading, and then her hand, still holding the letter, dropped by her side, her eyes closed, and her pallid face sank upon her bosom.

"Mist'ess! Oh, my dear mist'ess!" cried Minty, in alarm lest her lady should have fainted.

"Don't speak to me yet, Minty," breathed Erma, in scarcely audible words.

A little while longer she remained motionless, and then, with a sigh, lifted the letter and reread it. Yet a third time she read it, slowly, as if she would have engraved its words upon her memory. Then, with a deep sigh, she pressed it again and again to her lips and put it into the fire, watching it with wide-open, tearless eyes, until it was consumed.

"It is better—much better—as it is! If he had remained here he would have been taken! Now he has a chance of escape. A chance? Oh, Heaven! Only a bare chance! And where has he gone? Where, where will he lay his head to-night?" she murmured, wringing her hands, unconscious or forgetful of other eyes upon her.

"Mist'ess! My dear mist'ess! What is de matter wid you?" inquired Minty, in a great trouble.

"Don't talk to me just now, aunty," muttered Erma, scarcely above her breath, as she tried to regain her self-control.

After a little while she began to question Minty concerning her last interview with the overseer when she went to his house to inquire for the old daguerreotype.

Minty told her mistress all, dwelling compassionately on the excessive and unaccountable distress of the manager, on discovering that Gustave Perlemonte was the stepfather of Rodolph Wolfsohn and the master of the house.

Minty wondered greatly at all these things, as well as at the grief and anxiety betrayed by her young mistress; but she discreetly forbore to ask questions.

On the contrary, she persuaded the poor, young lady to lie down on the chintz-covered sofa, in the parlor, and rest, while she made her a cup of tea.

Half an hour later, while Erma was sipping this tea, the policemen returned from their unsuccessful pursuit of the fugitive, and insisted on going through the house again.

Erma made no vain objections, and the search was repeated to no purpose.

After apologizing for their second intrusion, they

finally withdrew from the house, leaving Erma somewhat relieved of her intense anxiety.

They had not yet recaptured the fugitive; "the shades of night were falling fast"; darkness would cover his flight, and so he would get a long start of his pursuers, even if they should be able to discover the direction of his flight, which was not likely.

Erma never went to bed that night, but spent the weary hours in watching, listening and praying.

Early the next morning she came downstairs, pale, languid and heavy-eyed from want of sleep.

Old Minty had a cheerful fire in the parlor, and the little breakfast table set there, because it was more cozy and comfortable than the dining room.

And she had prepared a dainty breakfast to tempt a failing appetite.

"I's got a nice, young, frisky chicken—fricassee—for you, honey; for I does notice, delikky ladies wot can't eat nuffin' else can eat frisky chicken," said the good creature, as she set the covered dish upon the table.

"Have you heard any more of the police, Aunt Minty?" inquired Erma, after she had acknowledged the woman's attention and seated herself at the table.

"No, honey; only dis, dat dey was put up at de 'Plough' tavern, in Ice Cliff, last night, an' hadn't found wot dey was a-lookin' for yet."

"That is good, so far. How did you hear it, Minty?"

"Dr. Parson Cleveland's man, Brown, stopped here, jes' now, to rest on his way to Marse Clement Gladden's with a message, an' he tol' me all about it," replied the woman, as she placed the coffee before her mistress.

Erma's appetite was gone, but, to please the affectionate old creature who had so carefully prepared her breakfast, she forced herself to eat and drink

"An' now you'll feel better, in spite ob all, my mist'ess; indeed you will," said Aunt Minty, as she cleared the table.

Very soon after this visitors began to come. The people of this neighborhood were full of curiosity and sympathy.

The news of the arrival of the police and the flight of the overseer had spread rapidly in all directions, and the

deduction that the escaped murderer of Gustave Perlemonte and the fugitive overseer were one and the same, obtained credence everywhere, and all persons, even those who had been too ready to blame Erma Wolfsohn for her indiscretion in taking such an overseer, were eager in their expressions of commiseration for her, who had been so basely deceived as to be led to engage a fugitive murderer in her service.

Her first visitors that morning were Mr. Clement Gladden and his inseparable companion, little Fance. He had come to express his sympathy and offer his services in any way in which Mrs. Wolfsohn might be able to use them.

Before he left, Dr. Cleveland was announced. He had come on precisely the same errand.

Erma warmly thanked both gentlemen for their proffered assistance, adding that should she need aid or counsel, she would gladly apply to them.

And to their numerous questions concerning the fugitive, she begged to answer that the subject was so distressing to her, she would gladly be excused its discussion.

Miss Beth Morset was her next visitor. She also was full of condolence, and lavish in offers of help; and she received something like the same thanks and the same reply that had been given to the gentlemen.

When Miss Beth arose, after an hour's call, to take her leave, Dr. Cleveland also got up to say good-by, evidently that he might escort Miss Beth, for the worthy doctor never missed such an opportunity.

Gen. Bibb and his two daughters were the next to arrive; and, following fast upon their footsteps, Mrs. Blantyre and Mrs. Somers.

And now Erma had to breast a torrent of invectives against "the monstrous villain" who had so grossly imposed upon her credulity and inexperience, and to parry a storm of questions as to how it had happened that she had been led to take him.

Erma replied to her lady friends as she had replied to the gentlemen—that the subject was inexpressibly distressing to her, and that she really must be excused from discussing it.

"And to think that Otho Herne, the murderer of Gustave Perlemonte, should have come here, to his victim's own house, to hide, in the disguise of an overseer! I never heard of such a thing in all the days of my life!" exclaimed Susan Blantyre.

"It would certainly seem to be the last place he would approach, or where the police would think of looking for him," said Mr. Gladden.

"The very reason why he concealed himself here, most likely," said Gen. Bibb.

All this while the fair widow, Mrs. Sophie Somers, was trying to catch the eye of Erma, without attracting the observation of the others.

Erma at last perceived this, and rising, walked away to a distant stand, and began to arrange some chrysanthemums that stood there in a vase.

"How rich the colors in those flowers are!" said Mrs. Somers, going to join her.

Then, stooping over the flowers, she whispered in a lower tone:

"Was it he?"

"Oh, yes!" breathed Erma, in a fainting tone.

"Ah! how imprudent! How came he to be here? How came you to allow it?"

"Hush! For Heaven's sake, hush! 'Necessity knows no law,' no, nor prudence. But hush!"

Then their voices gradually rose as they talked of the flowers, and so talking, rejoined the circle around the fire.

Still other visitors came—Dr. Dutton and Mr. Walter Lambe.

It was afternoon before the last visitor left.

And they nearly all went away to spread the report that the poor, young Mrs. Wolfsohn was almost overwhelmed by what had happened, and could not even bear to have the subject mentioned.

Erma, overcome with fatigue, slept the sleep of exhaustion that night, and the rest prepared her for the wear and tear of anxiety to be endured the next week.

It was a period of agonizing suspense and constant terror.

Daily, hourly she longed to hear some news of the fugitive's security, but how she might obtain this comfort she

could not know. Daily, hourly she dreaded to hear of his recapture.

So passed several days, and then the long-delayed relief arrived.

On Friday morning she sat before her untasted breakfast, waiting in heartsick impatience for the arrival of the messenger with the mail bag from the Ice Cliff post office.

Septimus came on time. He entered the room, bringing the well-filled bag, which he placed before his mistress, exclaiming:

"Oh, ma'am, de perlice is gone at las! I saw 'em go off myse'f, on to de top ob de stagecoach."

"Was—was—had—had they got—the man with them?" faltered Erma, pallid with deathly fear

"Him wot dey was a-sarching arter?"

"Yes! yes! Him!"

"No, ma'am, dey hadn't got him. I heerd de biggest ob dem say to some gemman how dey'd gib it up."

"Thank Heaven!" breathed Erma, from the depths of her heart, as she began to open the mail bag.

It contained only the monthly magazine and weekly literary papers for which she had subscribed, and one letter, directed in a strange handwriting—or a disguised one.

She opened it eagerly. It contained but one word, but that was written in the most emphatic manner:

"Safe!"

This quite satisfied her. She drew a long, deep breath. It was

"The sigh of a great deliverance."

It more than satisfied her—it compensated her for the disappointment she must otherwise have keenly felt in not getting letters from her absent husband.

A week had now passed since she had heard from him, and that letter, written from Fort Leavenworth on the eve of the marching of the regiment, seemed to have been delayed.

She told herself now that she had no right to expect regular news, because the regiment on its march southward over the plains would have few opportunities of sending letters—perhaps none.

Erma went gayly about her household affairs. The reaction from depression and dread was so great as to excite in her an exaggerated joyousness.

"It ain't lucky!" sighed old Aunt Minty, as she watched her mistress and listened to her singing. "No, it ain't lucky! All dis sudden gayety without rhyme or reason. Somefin is a-gwine to happen to my poor, young mist'ess, min' I tell you all, good Septimus."

"'Deed, I hope it ain't nuffin bad, den," said the old man.

"I's feared it is, Sept—I's feared it is," replied Minty, slowly shaking her head.

The woman was right. The next day the thunderbolt fell.

Septimus had, as usual, gone very early to the post office, and had brought back the mail to his mistress as she sat at her solitary breakfast table.

She had opened it as usual, and finding no letters and but a solitary newspaper, had left the latter unopened, as she often did when pressed with household affairs.

It was not until after her early dinner that Erma felt at leisure to look over the paper for general news. Individual news, personally interesting to herself or her friends, she did not expect to find.

She seated herself comfortably in her armchair, before the open parlor fire, and beside the round table, on which lay her books, pictures, and the unopened newspaper.

She took the latter up with a little sigh of satisfaction, drew it from its envelope, unfolded it, and turned to the first page and the first column of that page.

Then a frightful change passed over her face, leaving a look of intensest horror imprinted upon it. Her wide-distended eyes seemed riveted to the paper, while her jaw fell and every drop of blood left her cheeks.

For a minute, perhaps, she remained thus, and then shriek after shriek burst from her lips.

The two old servants, eating their dinner together in the kitchen, heard these agonized cries, and thinking no less than that their mistress must have taken fire and was burning to death, they sprang up instantly and rushed into the room.

They found her distracted, frenzied beyond all control, and then saw her fall into strong convulsions.

With exclamations of grief, terror and dismay, the two old people hastened to her assistance, and laid her on the broad lounge.

Old Minty did everything that her experience suggested for the relief of the sufferer, whom she now honestly believed to be laboring under a fit of common hysterics, though how brought on she could not guess.

Under directions old Septimus ran hither and thither, fetching and carrying all that was required.

Amid her endeavors to soothe the young distracted creature, Minty put gentle inquiries as to the cause of Erma's wild grief.

The first coherent words that Mrs. Wolfsohn spoke gave a clew to the mystery.

"Oh, Minty, he is gone, gone, gone, and I shall never see him again in this world! The cruel Indians have murdered him, Minty! They have murdered my husband!" she wailed, breaking forth into frantic lamentations.

And now the woman thought that her senses were wandering. She drew her fellow servant, Septimus, aside, and whispered to him:

"Run for the nearest neighbor! Run for Miss Barbra Gunn, and tell her de state as our mist'ess is in, an' ax her for de messy of de Lord to come here to her. An' den, w'en you's started she, go for Dr. Duttin hard as you can, an' fetch he."

The old man nodded intelligently and hastened away.

A few minutes later his horse's hoofs were heard galloping off.

Septimus, unconscious of any unusual event then taking place at The Marsh, and quite unsuspicious of any such marvel as the marriage of Cousin Wally Lambe, arrived at the house to hear first from the giggling servants the extraordinary wedding that had then recently taken place.

But Septimus felt that his errand was too important to be delayed, even by the discussion of such a racy subject, so he made his way to the new house and sent in a respectful message begging to see Miss Gunn on important business.

Miss Barbra, as we have already seen, came out from her company to speak to him in the hall.

She could make nothing of his terrified and incoherent talk, but that his mistress was taken dangerously ill, and was alone with her two colored servants.

Now, Miss Gunn, with all her violence of temper and extravagance of language, had both consciousness and benevolence.

To let a young neighbor suffer, and perhaps die, with no other attendance than two old negroes, was not to be thought of for an instant.

"Ride off as fast as you can, Septimus, and fetch Dr. Dutton as quickly as possible," she said.

"And you, mist'ess? Will you go to our young lady?" anxiously inquired the man.

"Of course I will, immediately. Jehial shall drive me over in the gig. Here, Jehial!" she called to her coachman, who was standing with a group of tittering darkies, peeping in at the parlor window to get a sight of the bride and groom, as if they had never seen either of them before. "Here, you, Jehial! Go to the stable and put George to the gig. Not Flora, mind! She's had work enough to-day carting around the 'happy pair,' Lord save the mark! George! put George in the gig, and drive around here to this door. I am going to Darkwood," she added, as she dismissed the negro man to do his errand, and returned to the drawing room to make her little explanations and excuses to the circle there.

"Erma Wolfsohn is taken suddenly ill. She has no one with her except the two colored servants. One of them has just come for me. Of course, I must go to her immediately, and you will all excuse me," she said, standing just within the door.

A general voice of surprise, commiseration and consent arose.

"What is the matter with her?" inquired several in a breath.

"Oh, how can I tell? I could not make head nor tail of old Sep's story except that his mistress was suddenly taken very ill—whether with congestive chill, cholera-morbus or catarrh, he could not say. Bab Bibb! Run

to the old house, and bring my bonnet and shawl and gloves here."

Bab sped on her errand, and soon returned with the required articles, saying, as she handed them, that Jehi was at the door with the gig.

"All right! Now, young folks, I may have to stay all night. So if I am not here by ten o'clock, fasten up the house and go to bed, for in that case I shall not be home until to-morrow—if then," said Miss Gunn, while she was equipping herself for the drive.

Rose and Lily promised on the part of the household to observe her directions.

Finally the old lady bade them all good-night, entered her gig, and set out for Darkwood.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A SEA OF TROUBLES.

From short, as usual, and disturbed repose,
She wakes; how happy they that wake no more;
Yet that were vain, if dreams infect the grave.
She wakes, emerging from a sea of dreams
Tumultuous, where her wreck'd, despondent thought,
From wave to wave of fancied misery,
At random drove, her helm of reason lost.
Tho' now restored, 'tis only change of pain—
A bitter change! Severer for severe.
The day too short for her distress; and night,
Even in the zenith of her dark domain,
Is sunshine to the color of her fate. —YOUNG.

It was yet early in the evening when Miss Barbra Gunn reached Darkwood.

A light was shining through the parlor windows, whose shutters had been left open.

Miss Gunn saw plainly into the room—saw the pale, recumbent figure on the lounge, and the dark form of the negro woman standing near.

"Jehial, hitch the horse. Then the next thing you do, close those window shutters from the outside," said Miss Barbra, as she stepped out of the gig and went up the front steps.

The door was not locked, so she let herself in and

walked directly to the parlor, where she found the group she had seen from without.

Minty turned and courtesied in silence.

Miss Gunn went up to the lounge and gazed on the prostrate form lying there, in what seemed an uneasy sleep.

Miss Gunn looked around with a questioning expression toward the negro woman, who came to her side, and whispered respectfully:

"I gived her morphy, mist'ess. She was dat wild an' 'stracted, I got afeared ob wot she might do to herself arter Septimus went for you, an' dere wasn't no one here to 'trol her violence but me, so I gived her morphy."

"It was a dangerous medicine. Did she take it willingly?" inquired the old lady.

"Oh, yes, ma'am. She said, 'anything to make her forget,' an' she took it from my hand willin'. And I knowed how to use it safe 'nuff, mist'ess."

"It is well you did, or you might have killed her," said Miss Gunn, gravely, as she sat down in the chair placed at the head of the lounge for her accommodation by Minty, and began to draw off her gloves. "Now, then, tell me what is the matter with your mistress."

"I fink somefin' 'cited her into strong highstrikes, fust of all."

"Hysterics? She was never given to such ridiculous and outrageous folly. Hysterics, indeed! I'd soon cure hysterics with a cold douche bath. I don't believe in them. Something has happened—something that has almost killed the poor child. She has heard some ill news. Tell me at once what it is."

" 'Deed, 'deed, mist'ess, if de young madam hab heerd anyfing ob any bad news, I dunno nuffin' 'tall about it."

"Woman!" exclaimed Miss Gunn, in a tone that made Minty jump, and caused the slumbering girl to stir uneasily and moan in her sleep, "don't prevaricate with me! It is no trifle that has caused this! Look at her! More like a dug-up dead body than a living and breathing creature! Tell me at once what news she has received!"

"I 'clare to my 'Vine Hebbenly Marster, ole mist'ess, ef it was de las' word I had to speak in dis worl', I dunno!

I dunno, indeed!" replied Minty, so earnestly and solemnly that Miss Gunn was forced to believe her.

"Very strange," muttered the old lady, as she divested herself of her bonnet and shawl, and handed them, with her gloves, to the woman to be laid aside. "Very strange, upon my word, Minty! Did your mistress receive any visitor to-day?"

"No, ma'am; nary one."

"Did she get any letters from the post office this morning?"

"No, ma'am; nary letter. I knows it, 'cause I was in dis berry room a-waitin' on my mist'ess at her breakfas' w'en Septimus fotch de bag in, an' my young mist'ess opened it, an' dere was nuffin ob no letter nor nuffin, but one usepaper, w'ich my young mist'ess put aside, an' nebber opened till she got t'rough her 'fairs, an' eat her dinner, chirp as a bird. Den, arter dat, down she sits comformable in her easy-chair by de fire, an' takes up dat usepaper to 'joy herse'f readin' of it. An' den I folded up de tablecloff, w'ich was de las' fing I had to do in de room, an' den, seein' my young mist'ess so happy an' comformable, I went out to eat my dinner 'long o' Septimus, w'en I heard awful, awful screams, one arter anoder. An' we bof—Uncle Septimus an' me—jumped up an' run into de parlor, finkin' how young mist'ess' close mus' a cotch afire, an' be a-burnin' of her up. But we didn't find nuffin like dat, but mist'ess clutchin' dat dere usepaper in her han' an' goin' on like she was ravin' 'stracted. An' not for ebber so long arter dat could we get a understandin' word out'n her, an' den it was nuffin' but jes' dis: 'Dey's killed him! Dey's killed him! De cruel Injuns has murdered my husban'!' An' dat she rabed ober an' ober again an' again. But den, in course, she didn't know wot she was talkin' 'bout, poor fing! I dunno wot could a fetched her so sudden into such a state," said Minty, reflectively.

"Oh! you thick-skulled, addle-brained idiot. You blind mole! You bat! You owl! Don't you see it was something she found in that newspaper?" wrathfully demanded Miss Barbra.

"Well, dere now, so it mus' a been! Dat usepaper! But who'd a t'ought it!" said Minty, good-humoredly.

"Anybody would have known it but a wooden-headed, mushy-brained fool! Go bring me that newspaper! I'll see what it is. Some dreadful war news, I suppose. Another bloody battle fought. Her husband wounded, or taken prisoner, or even killed outright, maybe. Who knows?" ruminated the old lady.

Minty found the paper where it had fallen on the floor, and brought it to the lady.

Miss Barbra, to "begin at the beginning," turned at once to the top of the first column of the first page, which was headed by those sensational lines, in staring type, so interesting and exciting to the general reader, but often so fatal to the peace of individuals. She read first:

FROM THE FRONTIER.

Attack of Indians on the Advance of a Marching Regiment—Capture of Army Wagons.

DEATH OF LIEUT. WOLFSOHN.

The paper fell from Miss Barbra's hands. She was a strong woman, and was even prepared for ill news. Yet this had overcome her for a moment.

"Great Heaven!" she exclaimed. "No wonder! Coming upon her so unexpectedly, too! Do you know what has happened, your poor, unfortunate, stupid owl?" she suddenly demanded, turning to the frightened negro woman.

"Oh, Lor'! No, mist'ess! What is it?" whimpered Minty.

"Your master is killed!"

"Marster killed! Oh, mist'ess!" cried Minty, clasping her hands in deep distress.

"Killed by the Indians, on his march. That is what your mistress read so suddenly, and that is what overthrew her."

"An' nuff to do it, too! Oh, my Hebbenly Lord! 'Nuff to kill her!" cried Minty, wringing her hands and raising her eyes prayerfully toward heaven.

Miss Barbra turned her attention to the young widow.

Erma's sleep had deepened under the influence of the narcotic.

In some little anxiety, Miss Barbra felt the pulse and listened to the breathing of the profound sleeper.

She found it all right; yet, nevertheless, she turned to Minty, and said:

"Opium, in all its forms, is a very dangerous medicine, especially in ignorant hands. It is all well now, as it happens. But don't you ever dare to give it again to anybody."

"Lor', Miss Barbra! ain't I been use to gibbin' it under de doctor's 'rections all my life? 'Sides which, was I gwine to let my dear young mist'ess rise to such 'citement as to heave herse'f out'n de windy or inter der ribber in her grief an' 'spair, an' me not strong 'nuff to hold her back?" sensibly argued Minty.

"Don't dare to dispute with me! I don't allow anyone to do so! Go upstairs and prepare your mistress' bed. If we are very careful, we may undress and convey her there without waking her up from this deep sleep," commanded Miss Gunn.

Meek Minty obeyed in silence.

A little later, the sleeper was undressed and laid comfortably in bed, without being awakened.

Miss Gunn left Minty watching by the bedside, and went downstairs to seek her servant, Jehial, whom she found cowering over the kitchen fire.

"Drive back home in the gig, and tell your Miss Rose that I shall not be home to-night, nor to-morrow, either. I cannot leave Mrs. Wolfsohn. Take this newspaper with you and tell Miss Rose to read the war news, and she will find out what is the matter. Do you understand all this?"

"Yes, mist'ess," replied Jehial, as he tucked the paper down into the depths of his pocket for safe keeping and arose to depart.

Miss Gunn returned to her post and sent Minty downstairs to attend to the neglected household affairs.

Later in the evening, Dr. Dutton came. He had seen the Washington paper, and read the war news that morning. He was not surprised to be summoned to the bedside of the suddenly and awfully bereaved young widow.

As the hour was so late and the way so long, he had come prepared to stay all night.

Minty showed him up to Mrs. Wolfsohn's room, where

Miss Barbra Gunn received him, and gave him as good an account as she could of the seizure of the patient, and what had been done for her.

"I reprimanded the woman sharply for daring to administer morphine," said Miss Gunn.

"Yet she did right. She is a good nurse, and has acted under me for many years," said the doctor, with a deprecating smile, for he was, like most other people, a little afraid of Miss Barbra.

Minty accommodated the doctor with a late hot supper —which he heartily enjoyed himself, though he would not have recommended it to anybody else—and afterwards with a comfortable bed and a bright fire in the best spare room.

Miss Barbra ordered Minty to go to bed, and to sleep, so as to be ready for her work the next morning, adding that she herself would sit with Mrs. Wolfsohn.

Erma slept profoundly through the night, and woke a little after daybreak. But oh! what an awakening! Who can imagine the anguish of returning consciousness to her?

It was well the doctor remained through the night, since in the morning all his medical skill was required to moderate the frenzy of her sorrow.

"Who can minister to a mind diseased?" asked Macbeth. We know that any experienced physician can do so, through beneficent medicines that act soothingly upon the nervous system.

When Dr. Dutton left Darkwood that morning to go on his usual rounds among his other patients, he left Erma Wolfsohn lying calmly in her bed, carefully watched by the unwearied Miss Barbra Gunn.

Very soon after the doctor's departure there was an arrival at the house.

Minty came upstairs, and in a whisper announced Mrs. Blantyre.

"Sit here by your mistress. I will go down and speak to Sukey Blantyre," said the lady, as she arose and relinquished her seat to the negro woman.

When Miss Gunn entered the parlor, she saw at a glance that Mrs. Blantyre knew the very worst.

The last-mentioned lady had not taken a seat, but was standing facing the door, pale, trembling and weeping.

"Minty tells me that you know it already," were the first words her quivering lips uttered.

"Yes, from the Washington paper, yesterday morning. Sit down," said Miss Gunn, pointing to one seat and placing herself in another.

"How does she bear it?" faltered Susan Blantyre, sinking into the large easy-chair.

"Not at all. She is prostrated. How did you hear it? By the newspaper?"

"No, I had not even seen the paper. I got a letter this morning from Capt. Blantyre, describing the calamity, and begging me to break the news as gently as possible to the poor young widow. I came this morning for the purpose, little dreaming that it had reached her first."

"Yes, 'Ill news travels fast,' and fastest to those most concerned."

"It is a great relief to me not to have to break it to her. And, indeed, I do not believe in the good of breaking news."

"There is no good in it. If you had been twenty-four hours in approaching the subject, the certainty of her bereavement at last must have left Erma just where the shock of the announcement has."

"Yes, indeed. Oh, I knew it would go terribly hard with her. I came off as soon as I had read Capt. Blantyre's letter, telling Mrs. Somers to have a small trunk packed and sent after me, and to keep house in my absence, for I have come to stay with Erma in these first days of her bereavement."

"I am very glad that you have. She is the most desolate young creature in the world. Without any relations or friends or even acquaintances, except the few that she has made here."

"She has a friend in you, Miss Gunn, for Minty tells me that you came last night at the first call of need, and have never left her bedside since. And she has a friend in me, as I will prove. But, my dear Miss Gunn, you must be tired out. Pray now do go to bed and get some sleep, and I will take your place."

"Thank you, Sukey, yes, I will; but first I want to hear about this sad affair. Did Capt. Blantyre give the particulars? Did you bring the letter with you? The newspaper gave but the barest outline of the facts."

"I did not bring the letter. In my hurry and distress I left it. Capt. Blantyre told me this much: It was on the third day of their march. Lieut. Wolfsohn had been sent forward with a small detachment of cavalry in charge of some army wagons, to a post selected for the encampment of the regiment on the coming night. When at some distance from the main body, the detachment was surprised by a large force of Indians and overpowered with great loss. The army wagons and horses were captured. Only two men escaped and found their way back to the main body. The rest were massacred. The regiment, on reaching the scene of slaughter, found and buried the dead on the same spot. There was nothing else to do, you see."

Miss Barbra Gunn groaned in the spirit.

"There is nothing but trouble and vexation in this world," she said. "I suppose you have heard of the folly committed at St. James' Church yesterday?"

"The marriage of Wally Lambe and Ada Mesh? Oh, yes; that news has spread like wildfire through the neighborhood. But what is their farce in view of this tragedy? Not worth a moment's thought. Oh, Miss Barbra, let me go immediately to that poor young creature. And do you go and get some rest."

With these words Mrs. Blantyre started up and threw off her shawl and bonnet, drew off her gloves, and cast them all carelessly upon the center table, to be ready for her newly assumed duties.

Miss Gunn led her to the bedside of the sleeping woman —sleeping under the influence of the powerful narcotic her desperate condition had rendered necessary.

"The doctor said she would sleep until afternoon; by which time he will be here again. I believe I can rest, now that I leave her in your charge," said Miss Barbra, as she retired.

It would be too distressing to follow Erma Wolfsohn through these first days of her bitter bereavement and frenzied anguish.

Days and nights passed between the raving and stupefaction, during which she was skilfully treated by Dr. Dutton, and tenderly nursed by Miss Gunn and Mrs. Blantyre.

It was at this period that Dr. Dutton made a discovery in regard to his patient, which he thought proper under the circumstances to communicate to Mrs. Blantyre.

"Is that so? I am sure she does not even suspect the fact herself! Poor, poor child!" sighed the lady.

"Nay, this may prove the best thing that could happen her—may save her life, by giving her a motive to live," replied the doctor.

Medical skill and careful nursing brought Erma through her terrible ordeal. But she arose from her bed the mere wreck of herself.

Deep melancholy had succeeded to frenzied lamentations. All her interest in life had passed away.

She was never left alone. When Mrs. Blantyre went home, Miss Beth Morset came to take that lady's place as companion to the afflicted one.

Miss Gunn had returned to The Marsh soon after Erma had left her sick bed; but she frequently came again, bringing with her offerings of flowers, fruit or dainties for the invalid.

Even Cousin Wally and Mistress Ada came and spent a day and tried to cheer her up.

Erma gratefully accepted all these offices of friendship, and perhaps the most pathetic aspect of her case was her efforts to be cheerful in the presence of her friends.

Still, it was evident that her interest in all worldly events had really gone, and that if she could not be aroused from her depth of melancholy and numbness of lethargy, her life or her reason must give way.

It was at this time that Susan Blantyre left the household in charge of Sophie Somers, and came again to stay with Erma Wolfsohn.

Perceiving that the young widow, instead of rallying from her despondency, had sunk deeper and more hopelessly into melancholy lethargy, Mrs. Blantyre thought the time had come to enlighten the inexperienced creature.

So one morning, while sitting with Erma in the old parlor, Mrs. Blantyre said:

"My dear, have you any suspicion of anything that may be in store for you?"

"I don't understand," replied Erma, indifferently.

"Anything that would give an interest to your future?"

"What do you mean?"

"Erma, do you love children?"

"I used to," was the plaintive reply.

"But do you not love them still?"

"I don't know."

"But you would love a child of your own, dear Erma."

"What do you mean?" inquired the apathetic creature, beginning to show some signs of interest.

"Dear Erma," said the lady, taking the thin, cold hand of the young widow, "dearest Erma, there is a little angel child on its way to comfort you now! Your child, Rodolph's child, is coming to console you—and for whom you must live."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE COMFORTER.

They told the soldier's widowed bride
That he a glorious death had won.
Oh, would, she thought, I too had died,
My love, for I am lone!
Desolate and lone! Desolate and lone!
—CONRAD.

Came a nurse of many years,
Laid his child upon her knee.
Like summer tempest rained her tears—
"Sweet, my child, I live for thee."—TENNYSON.

"And is this true? And shall I be a mother? The widowed mother of a fatherless babe? Oh, most unhappy child and mother! Better the one were dead, and the other ne'er should live!" Erma cried, still in the first bitter anguish of her bereavement.

"Do not say that, dear Erma. It is sinful. Does not Providence know best what is good for us? Ah! Erma, you cannot imagine what a balm the babe will be to your bruised heart. As it lies upon your bosom it will draw all the pain, fever and anguish out. Ah! they have heavenly healing powers—those innocent, unconscious baby

hands. Believe it, Erma; it is truth," said Susan Blantyre, tenderly, solemnly.

But the young widow shook her head in pallid, tearless agony, like one who had lost every hope in this life.

"Rouse yourself, dear Erma, to make ready for this angel visitor, for it will come to you unprovided, bringing neither gold nor silver, scrip nor bag. You will have to make everything. Come, Erma, to the sweetest work woman ever did, and I will help you, and live over again with you the first happy days of my own young motherhood," softly pleaded Susan Blantyre.

But not all at once could the despairing young widow be stirred to interest or activity.

Susan Blantyre showed hereslf a true, patient, persevering friend.

Delegating her home duties, for the present, into the capable hands of Mrs. Somers, she remained at Darkwood, ministering with equal tenderness and tact to the bereaved one there.

Her devotion began to receive its reward. She succeeded in persuading Erma to accompany her to church on Sunday, and when the services were over she was glad to see that the half-heartbroken creature came home in a less despondent mood than she had gone forth.

On Monday she coaxed Erma to go with her on a shopping expedition to Ice Cliff, where they bought the finest white goods that the village could afford, and again Susan Blantyre rejoiced to see that her stricken friend returned with more cheerfulness than she had set out.

All that week Susan Blantyre spent interesting and engaging her charge in cutting out and making up tiny white garments, of fairy texture and beauty, for the outfit of the expected little stranger.

"No more interesting or delightful occupation or amusement could be devised for her under the sun. And it will last her for weeks or months," said that good lady to herself.

And, in fact, Erma soon began to take comfort, and even pleasure, in her work of preparation.

When Mrs. Blantyre was at length obliged to return home, she, unknown to Erma, privately sent to Miss

Elizabeth Morset to come and take her place, as guest and companion of the young widow.

And on the morning that Miss Beth came Mrs. Blantvre took leave.

On reaching home, she found letters just arrived from her husband, the captain, saying that he had taken charge of all Lieut. Wolfsohn's personal effects, and that he would send them home by the first opportunity.

Miss Beth Morset was a variety in the way of a consoler. Her deep religious convictions and her strong sense of duty had a tonic effect upon Erma Wolfsohn.

As Erma became less active Miss Beth took much of the burden of domestic affairs off her hands, and was as often in the kitchen and in the storeroom as in the parlor and chambers.

And many were Miss Morset's talks with old Aunt Minty. She had one firm bond of sympathy with the aged negro woman—fervent Christian faith. But she had to combat a good deal of superstition on the part of her humble sister.

"I knowed how dat same said Thunder Debbil didn't mean no good hauntin' de place all las' summer! I knowed somefing dreffful were goin' to happen! I knowed it, Miss Beff, an' now it's happened! All along ob dat same said Thunder Debbil," said Minty, solemnly, one day when she was busy in the kitchen making a light pudding by a new receipt, under Miss Beth's personal supervision.

"Oh, Aunt Minty, how can you think that the phenomenon of the equinoctial storm here in these woods could have anything to do with the death of Lieut. Wolfsohn out on the far Western plains?" said Miss Beth, gravely.

"Dunno, young mist'ess; don't pertend to know how it could be, but I know it was! Fust time dat Thunder Debbil 'peared to us was in de quincyquontial storm on de twenty-fust ob March, two years ago last spring! An' 'fore de year was out poor mist'ess died! Nex' time he 'peared to us was in anoder quincyquontial storm a year ago last March, soon arter which poor Marster Gustave Perlemonte, he died a wiolent deff at de hands ob a malefactor! Poor Marster Gustave! Can't help pityin' ob him, honey, for bein' cut off so sudden in his sins, eben

'lowin' he was sich a gran' wilyan. An' now, here's been de self-same Thunder Debbil a-dancing in all de quincy-quontial storms dis fall, an' so we hears ob de deff of de dear young marster by de hands ob de savidge barbarium Injuns! An' no wonder! No wonder, Miss Beff. W'en-ebber he 'pears, look out for delamity."

"My poor Minty, how darkened is your mind! That 'Thunder Devil,' as you call it, is no more than some atmospheric phenomenon, which no doubt could be explained if one only knew how to do it."

"Jess so, Miss Beff! If anybody only knowed how to 'splain it! Did you ebber see him, Miss Beff?"

"See whom?"

"Dat same said Thunder Debbil."

"No, I never did."

"Den if you nebber did see dat awful Thunder Debbil, you don't know nuffin' 'bout him, an' you ain't component to gib no 'pinion, young mist'ess. I don't mean no 'fense, ma'am; but you ain't, you know! I's willin' to be 'structed by you in 'coctin' new-fangled puddin's and fings, but not in dese ghas'ly, ghos'ly 'pearances wot I has seed, an' you hasn't, young mist'ess," said Minty, with more of self-assertion than she had ever been known to show.

"Well, well, Minty, the equinoctial storms are over for a while; so let us hope that there will be no more disturbance from the unexplained phenomenon," said Miss Beth.

But old Minty slowly shook her head, murmuring:

"I hopes not, honey; I truly hopes not! Can you tell me, honey, w'en de young chile is 'spected to 'rive?"

"Some time in March, I think Mrs. Blantyre said."

"'Umph—humph! In de quincyquontial wedder, I reckon! Well, honey, if dat self-same said Thunder Debbil should make his 'pearance 'bout dat time, in dem dere storms, I shouldn't 'spect nuffin' else dan de deff o' bofe modder an' chile. Dere!"

"Oh, Minty, but this is wicked! To prophesy such evils!"

"'Tain't me wot phophesies. It's de Thunder Debbil," persisted Minty, as she again turned her whole attention

to the light pudding; and then she changed the subject by saying:

"I likes dis new 'cepit o' your'n, young mist'ess. It makes a dainty an' deliky dessert. A frisky chicken an' dis would be jess de dinner my own young mist'ess would like. La she can eat a bit o' frisky chicken, w'en she can't eat nuffin' else."

"'A frisky chicken'! What manner of chicken may that be, Minty?"

"Why, don't you know? Young pullet, cut up an' stewed tender and dressed up wid new cream sass."

"Oh, a fricassee chicken."

"Yes, dat's wot I say—a frisky chicken."

"Well, you can get on now without me, and I must return to Mrs. Wolfsohn," said Miss Beth, as she left the kitchen.

Many times after this did old Minty bring up the subject of the "Thunder Debbil," and as often did Miss Morset combat her superstition, but to no purpose.

The lady was at length forced to confess that when once malaria or a fixed idea takes possession of a person, they are equally uneradicable.

Miss Beth stayed with Erma until late in December, and then took leave and went home to prepare Christmas decorations for the church.

According to a previous arrangement, Rose Bibb arrived at Darkwood on the afternoon of the same day that Miss Morset left.

Now, if Rose Bibb was not a perfect consoler in affliction, she was certainly an interesting companion at other times.

And though she might not have been a desirable visitor in the first dark days of Erma's sorrow, yet now, when the young widow had in some degree recovered from the shock of her awful bereavement, Rose proved to be a very agreeable guest.

She came, full of interesting news of those in whom Erma began again to take a friendly interest.

"How do the newly married pair—Mr. and Mrs. Walter Lambe—get on? Are they still at The Marsh?" inquired Erma, with a slight smile.

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed Rose, laughing outright. "They are at The Marsh, and likely to remain there."

"I think I heard that they had intended to make a round of long visits among their friends and acquaintances," said Erma.

"So they had, but Aunt Barbra told Cousin Wally that they must not offer such visits—that they must wait for invitations—that they were welcome to stay at The Marsh until they could do better."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Erma, in pleased surprise.

"Yes, indeed. And you may well look astonished, knowing what a passion Aunt Barbra flew into over that marriage. She danced a war dance when she heard of it. She threatened to massacre and scalp everybody concerned—or something of the same sort. But la! it is all over now. You don't know Aunt Barbra as we do who live with her. If ever there was a woman with the temper of a fury and the heart of an angel, Aunt Barbra is that woman."

"It is certainly very good of her to give a home to that reckless pair," said Erma.

"It is, indeed. And they appreciate it, and make themselves very useful to her—a result which she did not expect. Cousin Wally, to be sure, was always her acting overseer, and still continues to be."

"Yes, but what can Miss Mesh—I beg her pardon, Mrs. Wally Lambe—do?"

"Make the dear old lady's caps and frills and gowns, to be sure."

"Oh, to be sure! But now tell me about Mr. Gladden and little Fance. Has he got a governess for her yet?"

"No. He has had a standing advertisement in the New York and Washington papers for the last three months, and has corresponded with a great number of applicants, but without effecting an engagement with any."

"Indeed! Why, how comes that? The situation is a most desirable one."

"Yes, in some respects; but not in others."

"To what others do you refer?"

"To these—that there is no lady at the head of Mr. Gladden's establishment, and that any young or middle-

aged governess who might take the place would subject herself to criticism, if not even to scandal."

"Why—Rose! How can people dream of such a result in his house? Clement Gladden is the purest man of men!" exclaimed Erma, almost indignantly.

"But he is a man, after all. I don't know anything about it, you see, Erma. I only repeat what I hear Aunt Morset and Aunt Barbra and Dr. Cleveland say. They all say that it would not be proper. And all the distant governesses who have applied for the situation, with good references, seem to have the same ideas, for on learning that there was no lady at the head of the house, they have 'respectfully declined' the position. To be sure, there were some applicants who made no difficulty on that account, but then they had no references, so they would not do."

"How did you know all that?"

"Oh, through Aunt Morset and Dr. Cleveland, with both of whom Mr. Gladden took open counsel."

"And in the meantime Fance has no teacher."

"None. Mr. Gladden did propose to send her to Blantyre House to share the studies of her elder sister and brother. But, dear me, the child went so wild with grief at the prospect of parting with her old friend, that the idea had to be abandoned at once and forever."

"It is perfectly wonderful, the attachment between that patriarch of seventy years and that infant of five."

"It is, indeed. I don't understand it, and never shall."

"What is he going to do about Fance's education?"

"Teach her himself, until he can find a good governess willing to take charge of her, under such exceptional circumstances—if he ever finds one, which does not seem probable."

"Miss Mesh made no difficulty in taking the situation."

"Well, you see, Miss Mesh was an old friend and acquaintance of the family, and was there, just in Mrs. Fleetwood's time, as visitor, and only stayed on as governess to the child. And yet even she got talked about."

"She did?"

"Didn't she! Why, it was awful, awful, the way people talked about Miss Mesh, for living in a widower's house without any other lady to countenance her. Aunt

Barbra says she thinks that was the reason why Mr. Gladden, in the goodness of his heart, favored the marriage of Miss Mesh and our Cousin Wally."

"This is all so strange to me," said Erma with a sigh.

The entrance of Minty to set the table for tea, which Erma always took in the old parlor, stopped their talk.

Anxiety for the living began to dispute possession of Erma's heart with grief for the dead.

She had not heard any news either from or of the fugitive overseer since that one little mysterious note, without date or signature, that came to her through the post office the second day after the sudden flight.

She had watched with feverish impatience for another note through the post office, in the hope of hearing of his continued safety, and also for news through the public newspapers, in the fear of learning of his rearrest.

But no intelligence had come to confirm her hopes or fears. She had, therefore, every reason to believe the fugitive to be still at large, but without the means of safely communicating with her.

The sudden shock of her husband's death, and the bitter grief that followed it, threatening even the overthrow of her reason, had for some time put all thoughts of the fugitive out of her mind; but now that three months had passed, and she had somewhat rallied her strength, she began to wonder why she never heard from Aleyn, or Herne, as the reader may please to call him.

She began to fear that he might be dead—or still worse, that he might be living, in exile, in illness and in wnat, without even the means of letting her know his condition.

This anxiety wore upon her—warring even with her great grief for the dead.

"It is well with the dead," she said to herself; "however the living may grieve and mourn their loss, it is well with the dead, who are not really dead, but who live never to die again. But, oh, how is it with him? In what agony of body, what anguish of mind may he not be suffering, and dying a living death, even now?"

Then she would slip away to her room, fall upon her knees and pray.

It has been said that sorrow for the living is heavier to

bear than sorrow for the dead. It almost seemed so in the case of Erma Wolfsohn.

"There is some anxiety that is wearing her out—some trouble that is not the death of her husband," said Rose Bibb to herself; as she watched her hostess feverishly searching the inside of the mail bag and then the columns of the newspapers every morning when the messenger returned from the post office.

It was later in December before her anxiety was relieved.

On the morning of Christmas Eve, while she and Rose sat at breakfast in the old, yellow parlor, the mail bag was brought in and laid upon the table.

Erma seized the bag and opened it in haste, and turned out two or three newspapers and one letter, which she opened with feverish impatience.

It was, like its predecessor of the early autumn, without date or signature, but it contained these cheering lines, written in a hand recognized by Erma:

"Safe and well. A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to you."

"Thank Heaven!" burst from the lips of Erma, in a moment of intense relief.

"You have good news!" exclaimed Rose Bibb, in sympathetic satisfaction.

"Yes, I thank Heaven!" answered Erma, as she reread the note, and then put it into the fire, and watched it burn to white ashes.

"That is what I never could do with a letter of a friend," said Rose.

"Not when the words are written indelibly upon your heart?"

"No, not even then."

No more was said.

As Erma seemed disinclined to enter into any details of her "good news," Rose had too much tact to make any further inquiries.

From this day Erma really improved in health and spirits.

She spent a calm and cheerful Christmas, going to church in the morning and dining quietly tête-à-tête with Rose Bibb in the afternoon.

But Christmas festivities and merriment were going on all around them in the neighborhood that day; and for that week the program included a dinner party at Gen. Bibb's, on The Hill, a tea party at Mrs. Morset's in The Dale, a supper and ball at Miss Barbra Gunn's, of The Marsh, and a children's dance at Mr. Gladden's, of Brighthome.

Of course, to all these entertainments Erma and her guest had been bidden.

It was neither convenient nor agreeable for Erma that she should accept any invitation abroad. In fact, it was not expected that she should. But she pressed her young companion to do so.

"You must not shut yourself up with me, you know, my dear. You must go out and enjoy these parties with other young people," she said to her.

"Indeed, dear Erma, I could not enjoy myself at the gayest ball, knowing you to be here alone," replied the generous girl, who continued steadfast in her resolution to abjure pleasure and remain with her mourning friend.

But early on the day after Christmas came Miss Beth Morset, in the old Morset gig, and with a good-sized trunk on behind.

"I have come to stay with you, if you will have me, Erma," said the lady, as she entered the parlor, where the friends were sitting together.

"I am very grateful to you, Miss Beth," exclaimed the young widow, earnestly, as she arose and embraced her visitor; "very, very grateful to you; for not only did I wish to see you for your own sake, but I also wished to send away this dear girl, so that she could take some share in the Christmas reoicings. I know that you do not care about parties, Miss Beth."

"No, not at all. They bore me terribly. I neither dance nor play games, you know," said Miss Beth, with a smile, as she laid off her bonnet and shawl, and sat down to make herself at home, while the sound of voices and steps, accompanied by a noise of thumping and bumping, announced the fact that the servants were carrying her trunk upstairs to her former room.

"Father's dinner party is to come off this afternoon, I believe," said Rose.

"Of course it is; that is the reason why I came this morning. I thought you would like to go."

"Yes, I would like to go, now that you are here to stay with Erma; but I would not like to go and leave her alone."

"You are a good girl, Rose, and shall come back to me after Twelfth Day, when all these junketings shall be over," said Erma, taking the hand of the young creature and pressing it affectionately.

"I told Humphrey to wait orders. Perhaps you would like to go home in the gig, as it passes by The Marsh?"

"Thank you, Miss Beth, so I should. I will run upstairs and pack now. It will not take me more than an hour," said Rose, flying out of the room.

It did not take her that.

In much less time she had packed up, bidden good-by to her friends, and gone.

Miss Beth spent Christmas and New Year with Erma, and at the end of the holidays gave place again to Rose Bibb.

Thus the kindly neighbors made life endurable for the lonely young widow, until the long winter had passed away.

With the earliest violets of the spring came Erma's child, a little, brown-eyed boy, with a strange, deep pathos impressed upon his tiny face. Mrs. Blantyre was with the poor young mother at the time, and to her Minty expressed her own private opinion:

"I don't like de looks ob dat baby, I don't."

"Why, he is a beautiful boy. I never saw so young a child with such perfect features and complexion," exclaimed the lady.

" 'Tain't dat, ma'am. He's beautiful 'nuff, if it comes to dat—too much so for dis worl'; but he looks so like he was born to trouble."

"Oh, Aunt Minty, don't say that! The child has a sweet, lovely, pathetic face, but it is only the reflex of the mother's sorrow, that makes it look so sorrowful. It is the shadow of the past, not of the future, of history, not of prophecy, that lies on his baby brow."

" 'Haps so, honey; 'haps so! 'Deed, I wish it may be

only dat. Anyways, nobody ain't seen nuffin' ob de Thunder Debbil yet, an' dat's one good fing," concluded Minty.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A SINISTER STRANGER.

Think'st thou there are no serpents in the world,
But those who slide along the grassy sod,
And sting the reckless foot that presses them?
There are, who, in the path of social life,
Do bask their spotted skins in fortune's sun,
And sting the soul! Ay, till its healthful frame
Is changed to deepest, festering, sore disease,
So deadly is the wound. —JOANNA BAILLIE.

Time passed; spring blossomed into summer; and on the lawn between Darkwood House and the bright Low River a smiling young mother and her lovely infant might daily be seen. They were Erma Wolfsohn and her child.

It was as Susan Blantyre had predicted—the baby had healed the broken heart of its widowed mother.

About this time the Rev. Dr. Cleveland had advised Erma of a duty that she had hitherto omitted to perform, but more from incapacity than from negligence—to take out letters of administration from the Orphans' Court to be appointed the legal as well as the natural guardian of her own child, the little heir of Darkwood.

Dr. Cleveland himself offered to accompany Erma to Ice Cliff on that business.

The youthful widow thankfully accepted the proffered service, and on the appointed day, escorted by the rector, she drove to Ice Cliff, where she received the necessary documents appointing herself and Mr. Clement Gladden guardians of her son and joint trustees of his estate.

The accomplishment of this simple but important business was a great relief to Erma, who had shrunk from it with all a young woman's dread of law courts.

It was not quite so satisfactory to the rector.

"Why did you allow Mr. Gladden to be appointed as your coadjutor, madam? When his name was suggested by the judge, why did you not object to him?" he inquired.

"Why, because I like and respect him. I was so glad Judge Martin named him. Why should I have objected?"

"On account of his age. He is seventy years old. He can scarcely be expected to live to see his ward ten years old."

"Oh, is that it?"

"Certainly."

"I never thought of that before."

"The wonder is that the judge did not."

"I am very glad he didn't, then!" impulsively exclaimed Erma, "if his thinking would have prevented him from appointing Mr. Gladden! I would rather have Mr. Gladden, even for a few years, than anyone else I know. If he should pass away before my boy reaches his majority, why, the court can appoint some one else, if it pleases."

The rector said no more, but touched Henry with his whip—for he was driving the little, one-horse carriage belonging to Darkwood.

Erma felt as if in some way she had wounded her friend, so she hastened to say:

"You know, of course, that there was no hope of my getting you to be the joint guardian of my child, Dr. Cleveland; for I have heard you declare most emphatically that you never would act in such a capacity."

"I know it, my dear madam; but you might have found a more capable man than myself and a younger one than my neighbor of Brighthome," replied the rector, with a smile.

"I do not think so. I am quite satisfied," said Erma.

And the discussion dropped.

When they reached home the rector declined the invitation to stay to dinner, and mounted his own horse that had been standing in the stable, and rode over to The Dale to dine with Mrs. Morset and—Miss Beth.

On the night succeeding this same day that had witnessed the journey of the young widow to and from Ice Cliff, a singular event, fraught with fate to her and her child, was taking place at the tollgate house of Cousin Wally's Bridge.

It was quite late and pitch-dark, when the weary old colored couple who kept the gate and took the toll, feel-

ing quite convinced that there would be no more passengers, concluded to go to bed.

Uncle Peter Lucas went out on the bridge with his lantern, and having turned it east and west to command both ends of the bridge and the roads leading to them, and seeing no traveler approaching, he put up the bar and went indoors.

Aunt Phebe had, in the meantime, prepared a mug of hot mulled cider, of which they both partook.

Then the old man covered up the fire, and they both knelt down and said their prayers, and went up to the loft to bed, and went quickly to sleep, for they had no cares of wealth, ambition or politics to keep them awake.

They had slept soundly, perhaps, three hours, and it was some time after midnight, when the old woman was rudely aroused by a violent noise outside, which did not, however, seem to disturb the profound sleep of her husband.

"Wot dat? Who dar? My Lor', stop all dat noise 'fore yer runs me offen my head!" cried the woman, sitting up in bed, and staring wildly around the dark loft with its one little square window, through which the faint dim light of an overclouded night sky came.

But the noise continued, and even increased in violence.

"Peter! Peter!" cried Phebe, hallooing into her husband's ear while she shook him soundly; "wake up, Peter, and get your gun! Dere's somebody out dere a-tryin' to break down the tollgate bar! Peter, I tell you! I's scared almost to deff!" she shouted.

But Peter lay like a log, while the noise outside continued to increase.

"Oh, Lor'! Wot will I do? If dat man o' mine sleep so soun' now in his bed, wot will he do w'en he gets in his grave? 'Deed, I's feared he'll sleep so soun' den dat he won't eben hear de Angel Gabriel's horn, an' den he'll be forgot an' lef' dere forebber. But dat would jus' suit him, ole sleepyhead as he is. Peter! P-e-t-e-r! Berry well, den. You won't wake up for no callin', I'll try wot a big pin will do!"

And suiting the action to the word, Aunt Phebe drew a pin out of her nightgown, and stuck it half an inch into the flesh of her sable lord and master.

"Ar-r-r-r-r!" yelled the aroused sleeper. "Wot's dat?"

"It's robbers and murderers tryin' to beat down de toll-gate bar an' steal de bridge! Dat's wot it is! Listen to 'em!" exclaimed Phebe.

Peter nursed his wounded flesh while he stared around and listened.

Old Peter was no coward.

"Gimme my gun!" he cried, jumping out of bed and hurrying on his clothes.

"Here 'tis, Peter; but don't go an' run no risks, Peter! Jess you stan' behind de house an' fire at 'em," said Phebe, as she put the old musket in the hands of the man.

"I'll see who it is afore I fire," said Peter, hurrying downstairs, gun in hand.

"Lor' a messy, can't you 'bate dat noise one bit before a body can get at you?" cried the old man, while he stood the gun in a corner until he had lighted a candle and set it on the table.

Then he took the gun and opened the door.

The noise of beating and calling had continued without a moment's intermission up to this time; but as soon as the light from the open door gleamed out upon the bridge the noise suddenly stopped, and a voice spoke out clearly:

"Well, I thought the house must have been deserted, or the inmates dead! Do you often sleep as sound as that, old toll taker?"

"Lor', marster!" cried the old man, who recognized a gentleman's voice, though not the gentleman to whom it belonged. "I's mighty sorry to keep you waitin', but nobody nebber comes at dis hour. I'll let down de bar in a minute, sar, an' you can come t'rough and pass ober de bridge."

"I don't want to pass over the bridge. I don't want to go any farther than your house now. Can you give me any sort of rough accommodation for the night?"

"Lor' marster; what you call night? Dis ain't night; it's free o'clock in de mornin', an' will be broad daylight in an hour. Why, me an' my ole 'oman gits up at four o'clock in de mornin' at dis same said season ob de year," said old Peter, as he let down the bars.

"Well, night or day, can you give me a chair by your chimney corner for a few hours until the world is astir?" inquired the stranger, as he came through the gate.

"Sartain, marster; de best we has got, an' likewise a cup of coffee, if agreeable."

"It would be very much so, thank you."

"Step careful, marster. Feel along wid yer feet like, 'cause dere's holes in de planks, which mought let your feet t'rough and cripple you."

"Very well, I'll take care."

"I'd a lighted a lantern, marster, only you was in sich a hurry I hadn't time," said the old man, as he guided the stranger to the door of the hut.

"Well, I have seen more commodious accommodations, in my travels up and down the world, but this is much better than the open air," said the self-invited guest, as he sat down in the rough, chip-bottomed armchair and surveyed the rude but comfortable apartment, with its bare plank floor, unplastered stone walls and fireplace, unpainted oaken chairs and table, its broad dressers, with bright pewter plates and dishes, and its old clock, its front door between two windows, that opened upon the bridge, and its one back window looking upon the water.

There was no front or back yard, and none was needed. All refuse matter was cast into the river, whose current carried it off.

The old couple were able to keep their little house as clean as a ship.

"Yes, marster, me an' my ole 'oman finks how it is a great deal better'n de open air. 'Deed, we ain't got no fault to find wid it but jess dis—dat it is so cool here on de water we has to keep a little fire burning all day eben in dis fust ob June wedder."

"Ay, so?"

"Jess so, marster, ef you'll believe me! An' here comes my ole 'oman down de stairs, an' she'll make you a cup of coffee in no time, sar," said the old man, who was now very busy uncovering the coals on the hearth, and heaping kindling wood upon them.

"Sorry to have disturbed the old soul so early," remarked the stranger.

"It don't make no diff-nce, marster! It's gettin' on towards four o'clock an' she'd be up by dat time, anyways," said Uncle Peter, as, kneeling on the hearth, he blew the fire into a blaze, and then laid logs on the andirons.

By this time, Phebe, who had heard amicable voices in the house, and felt sufficiently reassured to put on her clothes and make her appearance, joined them at the hearth and dropped a low courtesy to the stranger.

"Dis gemman wants you to make him a good, strong cup o' coffee, old 'oman, an' you can do it, can't you?"

"Oh, yes, sartin; and I'll go skim dat crock of milk wot I left standin' in de pan o' cold water, kivered up outside to keep cool, an' I reckon I'll get sweet cream enough to make it good," muttered Phebe, more to herself than to others.

Peter, in the excess of his hospitality, lighted two more tallow candles, and stood them on the oak mantelpiece.

By their fuller light the old couple saw the stranger clearly for the first time.

He was a man of middle age, and of medium height, but of slender, delicate and elegant figure, where the serpent's grace, beauty and fascination were visible in every movement. His features were also regular and finely cut, in the Roman or aquiline type. His hair and beard, which he wore long and flowing, were black as jet. His eyebrows were heavy, his eyes dark. His complexion was so sunburned that its original color could scarcely be determined as fair or dark. His dress, or rather his clothing, for it was of the roughest sort, consisted of a navy-blue jacket and trousers and a black tarpaulin hat. He carried a knapsack over his shoulders.

Yet notwithstanding the rudeness of his appearance, the colored people had not mistaken him for a common man.

Old Peter officiously relieved him of his hat and knapsack.

Phebe bustled about, hung on her kettle of water, set the little table, toasted cold bread, fried rashers of bacon, made the coffee, and soon had an appetizing breakfast placed before the hungry traveler.

He ate heartily, while Peter and Phebe stood respectfully in attendance.

"What sort of a neighborhood is this for a man to come and settle in?" he inquired, when he had satisfied his appetite.

"A grand neighborhood, sar. Some ob de fust ob

quality libs here, on some ob de finest ob lands," said Peter.

"Ah! What estates in the neighborhood?"

"Well, sir, dere's Brighthome, and Blantyre House, and dere's Darkwood. Darkwood is de nighest, sar."

"Ah! Who lives there?

"At Darkwood, sar?"

"Yes."

"De widow, sar, ob course."

"Widow? What widow? I meant to ask you who was the master of Darkwood."

"It ain't got no marster, sar, 'less yer call a small, little, young, infant baby de marster, sar, 'cause he is de heir."

"What is the name of this heir?"

"Wolfsohn, sar."

The stranger fell into thought.

Peter relapsed into respectful silence.

Old Phebe, who had held her tongue longer than she had liked, seized this opportunity of loosening it.

"Oh, marster," she said, "now you talk about Darkwood, it is jes' de mos' unpleasantest place you ever did hear tell 'bout."

"Why so?" inquired the stranger, with seeming indifference.

"Why, marster, for de bad end as all come to wot was on it."

"What do you mean?" inquired the stranger.

"Why, sar, not to go no farder back, 'cause dere ain't no time, dere was de las' ole marster—Marse Gustave Perlemonte."

"What of him?" demanded the stranger, turning his chair so that he sat with his back to the light, and his face in the shadow.

"Why, Lor', sar, he was murdered!" replied the woman, in a low tone of awe.

"Murdered, was he?" said the stranger, with a covert irony which his simple hearers failed to perceive.

"Oh, yes, sar—in cole blood—on a boat—and his body flung into de sea."

"Hum! Really? Who murdered him?"

"Well—now—dere! I mos' forget de name ob dat dere gran' wilyun! Does you 'member ob it, Peter?"

"It was Hunt, or Hart, or Horn—or some sich," said the old man.

"So it was, somefin' like dat," assented the old woman.

"Ah! And what became of the murderer? Did he get off?"

"Who, him? No, sar! He were tuk up an' tried an' 'demned to be hung."

"And was hung?"

"O' course, 'cause he was 'demned to it, sar."

"Ha! ha! ha! ha! ha!" roared the stranger, throwing himself back in his chair and shaking with laughter.

The simple colored folks were shocked.

"He desarved it, sar; but I couldn't laugh about it," said Phebe.

"And who took the property after Perlemonte?" inquired the traveler, recovering from his paroxysm of mirth, and ignoring the rebuke of Phebe.

"Why, Marse Rodolph Wolfsohn, o' course; but he is dead now."

"He dead!"

"Yes, marster—murdered by de Indians out in de Wes'."

"Lord help us!" exclaimed the stranger. "But who is there now?"

"De widow, sar—his widow an' chile."

"Married and dead in one year!"

"Yes, sar, and in less time. He nebber did lib to see his son born, sar."

"What sort of a woman is this widow?"

"Oh, a born beauty, sar! De beauty ob de whole worl'."

The traveler arose, took out a rough leather purse, took from it a silver dollar and laid it on the table, saying:

"There, good people. Now let me have my hat and knapsack. The day is breaking, and I must be gone."

Phebe made a courtesy and pocketed the silver, while Peter brought the knapsack and hat and presented them to the stranger.

The traveler stepped forth upon the bridge, and looked to the right and left, up and down the river, upon which the reddening dawn was reflected. Then he set off, rapidly walking across the bridge, muttering to himself:

"Now for Darkwood."

Old Peter watched him a long way, and then went indoors, slowly shaking his head.

"I wonder who dat stranger is?" inquired Phebe.

"De debbil, honey! Sure's you're born, de debbil," said old Peter.

"I b'liebes you, ole man!" assented Phebe. "And he ain't arter no good."

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE WATCHER.

He knew himself a villain: but he deemed
The rest no better than the thing he seemed;
And scorned the best as hypocrites, who hid
Those deeds the bolder spirits plainly did.
He knew himself detested, but he knew
The hearts that loathed him crouched and dreaded too.
Lone, wild and strange, he stood alike exempt
From all affection and from all contempt.—BYRON.

The stranger walked rapidly across the bridge toward its eastern terminus. He pulled his tarpaulin hat deeply over his forehead to shield his eyes from the morning's dazzling light. The sun had just risen above the distant blue hills on the orient horizon, and was shining with a blinding radiance over land and water, kindling into diamonds the dewdrops that hung on bush and tree, glowing on the red chimneys of Miss Gunn's house in The Marsh, and flashing from the surface of the river.

"More than two years since I have seen this place. More than two years, and it seems two score!" said the man to himself, as he paused for a moment to survey the scene.

"Yet nothing is changed, except myself. Will anyone recognize me here, I wonder? The old folks at the toll-gate house did not—that is certain. I tried it on them first. It will be an amusing game to stay around in this neighborhood and watch for a time before making myself known. And then to claim my rights!

"But to stay here *incog.* any time I must find something to do. That will not be difficult. Unless the place

is greatly changed since I saw it, somebody is always wanting an overseer—the drunken vagrants that are often taken on in that capacity never keeping their places long. Hello! Who's that?"

The approach of a man on horseback from behind put an end to the traveler's soliloquy.

It was the old coachman coming from the post office, and coming a little out of his way, to do an errand at The Marsh; for Darkwood, it will be remembered, was on the other side of the river, and the messenger would have to cross the bridge again to reach it. He came up abreast of the traveler, who looked up and started.

"Mornin', marster," said the old man, civilly touching his hat, as he was about to pass on.

"Good-morning. Stop! I wish to speak to you," said the stranger.

He drew up his horse and respectfully dismounted, and, leading the animal, walked beside the foot passenger.

The latter looked sideways at the old man and smiled strangely.

"Do you happen to know anyone in these parts in want of a farm manager?" he inquired.

"Why, yes, marster! Sure 'nuff! I does so! Does you know ob any good, 'spectable one as wants a place, marster?" inquired the old man, with sudden interest and animation.

"Perhaps I do," replied the traveler.

"He must be a rale good, 'sponsible man, marster, none o' dem dere triflin' white herrin's wot drinks like fishes, an' don't do nuffin' else."

"Yes?"

"Oh! yes, marster; a hones', 'spectable pusson; no oder needn't 'ply to our place."

"Where is the place?" inquired the stranger, with a sidelong glance and a sinister smile.

"At Darkwood, marster, whey my young mist'ess lib all alone wid her infan' baby, and de two ole sarvants, ob which I is one an' Minty is t'other; not countin' de plantation hands wot libs in de quarters. My mist'ess is a young widdy lady, an' derefore, you see, marster, her oberseer 'quires for to be a moughty 'sponsible man."

"Yes, I see. So she is a widow?"

"Yes, marster. Her husban' was killed by de Injins las' fall. Yes, marster, and de ole marster before him was killed, too, on a steamboat, an' his dead body was pitched into de sea. Oh! I tell you, sar, we has been a moughty onlucky fam'ly."

"I should think so, indeed," replied the traveler, with the same sidelong look and evil smile.

"But, marster, if you should happen to know any sich a pusson as my young mist'ess 'quires, would you please for to let us know?"

"Certainly. To whom shall I apply?"

"Oh! 'ply right at de house, marster, to my young mist'ess herse'f. Dere has been 'nuff ob dem 'plyin', but none ob dem didn't suit."

"Well, I think my man will suit."

"I hopes so, sar. But dey is so onsartain. Now, dere was de las' oberseer my young mist'ess had, las' fall. He looked like a perfec' gemman, an' he was as sober as a judge an' 'dustrious as a bee; an' wot do you fink he was, arter all?"

"I am sure I don't know—an adventurer?"

"He was a 'scape conwick!"

"What?"

"A 'scape conwick, sar! wid de cons'ables an' 'tectermans arter him! Yes, and dey did say—some people did—how he were dat same said gran' wilyun wot murdered Marse Gus' Perlemony!"

"Eh!"

"I say, dey did say—some people did—how he were dat same said gran' wilyun wot killed Marse Gus' Perlemony!"

"But, I thought——" began the stranger, and then he stopped suddenly, as if recollecting himself, and after a short pause, inquired: "Did the constables succeed in catching him?"

"Who, de conwick?"

"Certainly."

"No, indeed, marster; not in dese here parts, dey didn't. He got clean off f'om here, and dey had to go 'way 'dout him; which I was glad, 'cause my young mist'ess wanted him to get off, 'cause he was sich a cibil-spoken, good oberseer, which I nebber did b'liebe was de same man

killed Marse Gus', 'cause he was hungged high as Haman. Well, now, marster, ef you'll 'scuse me, I'll ride on. I got letters for my young mist'ess, an' she allers likes to hab 'em on her breakfas' table," said the old man, preparing to remount his horse.

"You must have gone early to the post office to be back so soon," said the traveler, still detaining the negro.

"Which I did, marster. I allers starts at de crack o' day, so's my dear young mist'ess can hab her letters on her breakfas' table. Why, we darkies could stan' on our heads for our young mist'ess."

"What time did you leave Darkwood this morning?"

" 'Bout four o'clock. Now, marster, ef you 'scuse me, I'll go on. I has got anoder errand to do on dis side 'fore I turns and goes home to my mist'ess. Good-mornin', sar," finally said the old man, as he climbed into his saddle and trotted off.

The stranger walked to the right side of the bridge and leaned over the wall in a very thoughtful mood.

"Here's a mystery," he muttered to himself. "The old folks at the bridge told me that Herne was hanged for the murder of—ha! ha! ha!—ho! ho! ho!—Gustave Perlemonte! And the other old man hints that the escaped convict, who figured in this neighborhood as a respectable farm bailiff, was Otho Herne himself. Those two stories contradict each other. I must inquire into this affair, but I must be very cautious. Better not go to Darkwood to-day. Better go on to the next little inn and prepare—ha! ha! ha!—my letters of recommendation to the post of farm manager."

Saying this, the traveler arose from his reclining position and resumed his walk, crossed the bridge and went straight on the causeway, which was, in fact, a continuation of the bridge across the swamp or quagmire that bordered the river.

He passed the southern boundary of Miss Gunn's estate, and higher up the road that of Gen. Bibb's land, and then went on to the "Farmer's Halt," a small, clean tavern on the crossroads.

He engaged a room for the day and night, and paid in advance.

Here he locked himself in, unpacked his knapsack of a

suit of clothes and a soft felt, folded hat—all of which he hung up in a small closet in the recess of the chimney; a change of linen, which he put on the upper shelf of the same receptacle, and finally of an assortment of writing materials, which he spread out on the little deal table under the window.

He drew a chair to the table, sat down and went to work.

His window faced the east, and the sun, some hours high now, shone hotly into the room.

The stranger wrote on for a while, and then, with an imprecation against the heat of the weather, he started up, went and hung a towel over the keyhole, and then pulled off his disguising black wig and full, black beard, peeled off the heavy black eyebrows, and threw them in a heap upon the white bed, where they looked like a little set of Astrakhan furs.

Next he went to a basin and washed his face.

Finally he drew the table away from the window and out of the range of anyone's view from the outside, and sat down to work—a very different-looking man from what he seemed when he arose.

Then he had appeared a swarthy, sunburned, black-haired, black-bearded, heavy-browed man; now he looked what he really was—a fair-complexioned, rather delicate person, with a smooth face, high forehead, rather bald on the top, scant, light eyebrows, and thin, light hair.

The metamorphosis was complete.

Meanwhile, old Septimus had gone on home to Darkwood House, and found that his young mistress had for once contrived to breakfast without the mail bag.

The messenger was far more troubled by this occurrence than the lady herself.

He came to her where she sat in the shady parlor, rocking her baby to sleep, and looking the image of cheerful patience.

He was full of lamentations and apologies for being half an hour too late, and spoke of the traveler whom he had overtaken on the bridge, and who detained him, first to inquire after an overseer's place, and then to talk of other things.

"An' I didn't fink it was 'spectful to ride away an' leabe

a gemman while he was a-walkin' 'long a-talkin' to me, an' axin' ob me questions," said the old man, deprecatingly.

"No, certainly not, certainly not. It was not in your kind and courteous nature to do that. Now, don't trouble yourself any more about it. You have brought me a pleasant letter from my old friend, Bishop Whiting, and that is enough comfort for one day," said Erma, smiling, as she opened her envelope.

"But I wish you had got it for a relish wid yer coffee an' muffins, young mist'ess."

"Oh! I relish the coffee and muffins quite well without it—welcome as it is now."

"An' which you would a had it, anyways, if it hadn't been for dat se'f-same gemman wid his talk 'bout oberseer's place an' odder fings."

"By the way, do you think he wants the place for himself?"

"Now, young mist'ess, dat's jess wot I been axin' myse'f—does he want de place for hisse'f? An' I dunno. He nebber said, an' I nebber like to ax, 'cause he looked sich a gemman hisse'f, 'spite o' bein' dressed in sailor's clothes."

"Did he tell you his name?"

"Well, dere, now. Dat's anudder fing. He nebber telled me his name, an' I nebber took de liberty to ax. But I telled him to 'ply here, ef he wanted de place for anybody. Wasn't dat right, mist'ess?"

"Yes, it was right."

"An' I 'spects he'll be comin' here to-day, or to-morrow, an' you can question of him yourse'f, young mist'ess."

"Well, I hope he will bring good testimonials, either for himself, if he is the real applicant, or for somebody else. All who have hitherto come for the place have been such very objectionable people."

"So dey has, mist'ess."

"And we do need a manager so much."

"Indeed, does we, mist'ess."

Erma applied herself to the perusal of her letter, and the old man, understanding that he was dismissed, made his bow and left the room.

That night one of the heaviest thunderstorms that had

ever been known in those latitudes visited the neighborhood.

The sun had set behind a low, black line of cloud that was just visible above the western horizon, and which the weather-wise colored folks had supposed to signify nothing more serious than a rainy day to follow.

Soon after dark the house was fastened up, with the exception of the kitchen door, that was always left open until bedtime.

Erma Wolfsohn was sitting in her pleasant, homely old parlor, her workbasket with her sewing materials on the table by her side, and her baby in its wicker cradle at her feet. She kept one foot on the rocker, while her hands were busy embroidering a white merino cloak for the little sleeper.

Septimus and Minty were in the kitchen, seated on opposite sides of an old oak table, with a tallow candle, in a brass candlestick, between them.

Minty was knitting a gray yarn stocking, and Septimus was plaiting reeds to make a rustic basket.

It began to thunder.

"Hi, wot dat?" cried the old woman.

"Can't yer hear wot it is? A storm comin' up," replied the old man.

"An' it's de fust one ob de season, too. We didn't hab nuffin ob no quincyquontial thunderstorms dis las' spring. Nuffin 'tall but long, cold rains. An' I was moughty glad ob it, too, 'cause I was 'fraid ob de Thunder Debbil comin' back. Laws 'a messy! I hope he won't be comin' on now!"

"Don't be so unfaithless, Minty. De Lord ain't a-gwine to let no debbil take one o' His chillun!"

"Yes, but—— Oh, look! Listen!" cried Minty, breaking off, and hiding her head in her folded arms on the table as a blinding flash of lightning blazed into the room with a tremendous, deafening peal of thunder that came crashing over the roof as if a thousand bombshells had burst at once.

That was "the opening of the ball," and from that moment, for the next three hours, lightning blazed, and the thunder crashed, the wind raved, roared and howled, the rain dashed downward in torrents, while the rattling

shock of a chimney blown over, or the shrieking whirl of a tree torn up by the roots, added terror to the scene.

Old Septimus had put aside his basket plaiting, and now sat bent over in his chair, with his elbows on his knees and his head bowed on his two hands, in an attitude more of reverence than fear.

Old Minty sat with her arms folded on the table and her head buried in them, uttering a groan or a prayer, as some unusually blinding flash of lightning or deafening crash of thunder startled her.

After what seemed almost an eternity to the awe-stricken and terrified folks, the storm began to subside, the flashes of lightning were less vivid and incessant, the crashes of thunder less deafening and less frequent; the wind's roar had softened to a fitful moan, and the dashing torrents of rain to a steady fall.

The two old negroes were beginning to breathe freely and lift their bowed heads.

Septimus had just ventured the remark:

"I b'liebes de storm is gwine to go down," when they were startled by a violent shock.

The kitchen door was suddenly thrown open by two shrieking creatures, who fell upon the floor, faces downward, uttering cries and groans of terror.

"Laws 'a messy! wot's de matter?" exclaimed Minty. "Why, it's Winny Wicket and Hinderer! Wot in de worl' is de matter wid you two, an' wot on de face ob de yeth took yer bofe out in dis storm?" she continued, as she recognized and stooped over the intruders.

"Oh! oh! oh! De Thunder Debbil!" cried Winny Wicket, shuddering and shaking where she lay.

"Come down outen de clouds ob de storm an' chased us! He did!" exclaimed Hinda, trembling almost as much as her mother.

"My Lor'! Old man, run an' bar de kitchen door! Quick!" promptly commanded Minty, to her old fellow servant, who as promptly obeyed.

"'Tain't no use, dough. I know well 'nuff bolts an' bars can't keep he out, s'posin' he wants to get in!" said Minty, dolefully.

Meanwhile, the commotion in the kitchen had startled

Mrs. Wolfsohn in the parlor, and she now came out to ascertain the cause.

The lady's appearance restored confidence to the frightened negroes, who have almost as much faith in a good and beloved mistress as some Christians have in guardian angel or patron saint.

Winny Wicket and Hinda, in very shame, scuffled up off the floor and stood dropping courtesies.

"What has alarmed you?" inquired Erma, in a sweet, calm voice.

"Oh, mist'ess, dey bofe seen de Thunder Debbil! He done chased 'em in here!" cried Minty.

"An' I jess done barred de door to keep him out!" added Septimus.

"Nonsense! Some mischievous person has been frightening you, for a practical joke," said Erma, with a smile.

"Oh, no, young mist'ess! 'Deed it wasn't no pusson! We see him fust in de clouds ober de barn, an' den he cotch his eye on us an' lighted down an' run arter us, an' we run in here an' fell down a'most inter fits, an' Uncle Septimus he fastened de door to keep him out."

"Pooh! pooh! There can be no such thing as a Thunder Devil, you know. Some one has been playing a trick on you. But pray tell me how you come to be so far from home in this thunderstorm?" inquired Mrs. Wolfsohn.

"Dat was de werry reason, honey," replied Winny Wicket, a little incoherently—"de thunderstorm was. Me an' Hinderer had been 'wited to a quiltin' party at Aunt Phebe Plunket's, at de bridge. An' de storm cotch us as we was comin' home, jess arter dark, an' we stopped in one ob de empty log houses on de road, nigh your gate, young mist'ess, an' we stayed dere till de storm was ober, and we was on our way home an' took a short cut t'rough your place, w'en we come across de Thunder Debbil jess de way I told you, mist'ess."

"This is the trick of some mischievous person. I believed it last year, and I believe it now. I was willing to let this matter drop, while there was a cessation of the annoyance; but now that it has recommenced, I will have it looked to," said Mrs. Wolfsohn.

"Oh! mist'ess, I wish it was wot you fink, but dere nebber was no human man as tall as dat Thunder Debbil, nor likewise able to leap 'bout among de clouds like him," said Minty.

"Nonsense! But, Minty, these poor women are wet through. Take them to your room and give them dry clothes. And, Winny, you and Hinda had better remain here all night. By the morning the rain will be entirely over and the water run off the roads. Then, if you rise when Septimus does, you will be able to get home in time for your morning duties," continued the lady.

"Yes, mist'ess, thank you berry much, indeed," answered Winny Wicket.

Erma bade them good-night and went and took her child from the cradle in the parlor, carried it upstairs and retired with it to rest, leaving Septimus to cover up the fires and put out the lights.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

LYING IN WAIT.

The hunting tribes of earth and air
Respect the brethren of their birth;
Nature, who loves the claim of kind,
Less cruel chase to each assigned.
Even tiger fell, and sullen bear,
Their likeness and their lineage spare;
Man only mars kind nature's plan,
And turns the fierce pursuit on man.—Scott.

"Tell you dere's somefin' heavy hangin' ober de house. Tell you dere is. I know it! If it wa'n't so, dat Thunder Debbil nebber would 'a come! Ebery time he 'pears he brings kerlamity!" exclaimed Minty, as she busied herself washing up the dishes after breakfast the next morning.

Her guests of the night before had gone away with the first dawn of day, and there was no one in the kitchen with her but old Septimus, who was seated on a stool in the chimney corner, busy with the basket making that filled up every moment of his leisure time.

"I hopes not, Minty. I hopes not, wid all my heart," replied the old man.

"Wot de use ob hopin'? Ain't it always been so? Won't it always be so?" said Minty; and then she began and recapitulated all the calamities that had ever followed the appearance of the Thunder Devil.

"Arter all, it might jess a happened so, you know Minty," said the old man, deprecatingly.

"Well, an' it will happen so again. Mark my words," said Minty, solemnly.

At that moment there came a knock at the kitchen door.

"I reckon dat's Jehi, from ober to de Marsh. Go let him in, Septimus," said the old woman.

The old man arose and obeyed with his usual humility.

But no negro stood without. Instead of Jehial, from The Marsh, there appeared a man of middle height and dark complexion, with a heavy suit of black hair, heavy, black eyebrows, and a long, full, black beard. He wore a rather threadbare but well-brushed black business suit, and a soft, black felt hat.

Septimus immediately recognized his fellow traveler of the preceding morning.

"Oh! it is you, marster! I beg yer pardon, sir. If you will go around I will 'mit you t'rough de front door," said Septimus, noticing that the stranger in his changed dress looked more like a reduced gentleman than ever.

"It is of no consequence. I will step in here. I wish to see your mistress," said the visitor, suiting the action to the word and crossing the threshold.

Minty stopped washing dishes, wiped her hands, made a courtesy and set a chair, into which the stranger dropped with a nod of acknowledgment.

"Wot name shall I take to my young mist'ess, if you please, sar?" inquired the colored man.

"Shellval—Moses Shellval," replied the stranger.

Old Septimus bowed again, and went into the old-fashioned parlor, where he found his mistress, as usual, at needlework, with the babe in the cradle at her feet.

"It is de gemman come to see 'bout de oberseer's place, mist'ess," said the old man, respectfully, as he stood in the presence of the lady.

"Oh! is it for himself that he is going to apply?" inquired Mrs. Wolfsohn.

"I dunno yet, mist'ess. He didn't say; but in course he'll tell you."

"Did he give his name?"

"Yes, mist'ess; dough not till I axed him for it. It is Shellfish."

"'Shellfish'?"

"Yes, mist'ess, Shellfish, or Shellbark, or some such a name."

"Oh!" said Erma, with a little nod and smile, as she remembered the fatuity with which the colored folks always turned a proper name into some common word that sounded something like it. "Show him in here, Septimus."

The old man retreated, but soon returned and announced the "grim-visaged" stranger as:

"Mr. Shellball, ma'am."

"Set a chair for the gentleman, and remain in attendance, Septimus. Pray be seated, Mr. Shellball," said the lady, speaking first to her servant and then to her visitor.

"Shellval, at your service, madam—Moses Shellval," said the stranger, bowing and taking the offered chair.

"Mr. Shellval, I beg pardon," said the lady, correcting herself.

"I understand from your servant that you wish to engage an overseer," said the stranger.

"Yes, one that can come well recommended. I should be grateful if you could send me such a man, sir."

"I have come to offer myself in that capacity, madam."

"You!" involuntarily exclaimed Erma.

"Yes, madam, and I hope that my testimonials may prove satisfactory," replied the man, with a strange smile, as he produced a packet of letters from his pocket.

"But excuse me. I should scarcely have supposed, on seeing you, that you were seeking such a situation for yourself."

"Necessity knows no law, my good lady. Severe reverses of fortune have compelled me, for some years past, to earn my living in any honest way that offered," said the stranger, with a bow.

"I am sorry to hear you say that you have suffered reverses; but I think you are quite right in your resolution

to take up any respectable work that you can do," said Erma, whose sympathies were ever ready to reach out to the unfortunate.

The stranger bowed in silent acknowledgment of her kind words.

"Have you ever managed a plantation before this, Mr. Shellval?" she further inquired.

"Yes, madam. That has been my constant employment for some years past. My last position was on the Mount Laurel estate, owned by the late Chief Justice Montgomery. I only left his service at the sale of the property after his death. Will it please you to look at these testimonials, madam?" said Mr. Shellval, laying the packet of letters on the table before the lady.

"Thanks. Excuse me, then," said Erma, as she untied the bit of red tape that bound the parcel.

There were about a dozen letters, of different sizes, shapes and writings.

Erma took up and read one after the other, until she had finished the whole.

One and all, in varied hands and varied terms, recommended him as the very perfection of farm managers—a scientific agriculturist, an accurate bookkeeper, and an able financier—a man, in short, who would soon transform the poorest land into the richest plantation, and find the best market and the highest prices for its produce.

Such was the natural inference, at least, of all these letters.

As she finished and folded the last letter, Erma thought that she had never, in her life, heard of such a pearl of an overseer.

There could be no question about the desirability of having him. The only question could be whether she were rich enough to secure this treasure. This doubt kept her silent and thoughtful for a few moments.

"I hope my letters have been satisfactory," said Moses Shellval.

"Abundantly so. But a—person of your ability would probably require and command a much higher salary than I am able to pay."

"Oh! my dear lady, no. Give me just what you gave to your last overseer. Give me anything you please. It

takes but little to keep an old bachelor like myself," said the man, with his strange smile.

"You have no family, then?" said Erma.

"No, no family, nor anyone dependent on me, which enables me to do with a very small income."

"The salary that I can offer is not large. It is five hundred dollars a year, with the furnished cottage and the attendance of one servant, the use of one saddle horse and whatever you may require of the farm-produce for your own table," said Erma, hesitatingly.

"And what can mortal man ask more?" inquired the stranger, philosophically. "Madam, I am at your service, ready to enter upon my duties to-day or to-morrow, as you wish, only hoping that I may give you as much satisfaction as your offered terms give me. When shall I come?"

"Not before to-morrow. Your cottage will need to be opened and aired, and made comfortable for your occupation. But if you would like to look at this place, Septimus will go with you."

"Thanks. I should like to look at it," said Shellval, taking up his hat from the floor, and rising.

"Septimus, go and show this gentleman the overseer's cottage," said Erma.

The old man bowed in silent submission, and turned to lead the way.

The stranger cast a furtive, sidelong glance around the room, and then, with a peculiar smile, bowed and followed.

Now, it was a singular experience, that as soon as this man had withdrawn the influence of his presence from the room, Erma began to feel a vague doubt, fear and dissatisfaction.

This mood seemed without foundation, and without reason, so she never thought of acting upon it, even after old Minty had come in and said:

"Mist'ess, has you 'gaged dat man?"

"Yes, auntie. Why?"

"Oh! 'cause I is so sorry you is gone an' done 'gaged him."

"But why?"

" 'Cause I don't like his look; I don't, indeed, mist'ess."

"Now, see here, Minty, we really must not condemn any man for his looks, when everything else is in his favor. Now, I myself took a dislike to that man's looks, though I do not believe I thought about them until after he was gone, and to prove how very unreasonable this prejudice is, he has the very best recommendations I have ever seen."

" 'Deed, honey, I wouldn't care if he had rickomen's from de pope o' Rome an' de Presiden' ob de Benighted States, an' John Wesley hisse'f! I don't like nor I don't beliebe into him, honey, dere!"

"Prejudice, aunty! Nothing but prejudice! The man is a perfect treasure of an overseer," said Erma, smiling.

"Hopes you'll find him so, honey. 'Deed, I does. But dere! De Thunder Debbil 'peared last night, fo'bodin' bad luck! No! 'Tain't no use—I can't trust dat new oberseer, mist'ess."

"Just because your Thunder Devil appeared? Oh, Minty! Well! I hope to send that practical joker to pick oakum in the workhouse some of these days, and then you will no longer fear him, or judge others by his antics," said the lady, with a smile.

Old Minty left the room, solemnly shaking her head as she went, and muttering:

"No! I can't trust in dat black-bearded oberseer, I can't."

And neither could her mistress do so; though, as Erma had no apparent foundation for her distrust, she would not act upon it.

The next day the contract between the lady and her bailiff was executed.

It was drawn up by the accomplished Shellval himself, read over carefully by Erma, and then signed by both in the presence of Mr. Wally Lambe, who happened to be in the house and opportunely on hand to witness the document.

The new overseer took possession of his house and entered on his duties the same day.

And, surely, in the very first week he began to justify the high encomiums that his former employers had lavished upon him.

The sluggish plantation awoke to new activity. Old

fences were mended and new ones put up; old buildings were repaired and new ones erected. Old fields were cleared, orchards and vineyards were trimmed and thinned, and, in short, the whole estate began to be renovated and restored to new life.

Erma was pleased. Her only doubt was about the cost, but her manager set her at ease even on this head by saying:

"I understand these affairs, my dear lady! You will permit me to improve the place as much as I think proper, so that your money account is balanced on the right side at the end of the year?"

"Oh! yes, Mr. Shellval. All I wish is to keep the property out of debt. I must try to do that for the child's sake. He is the heir, and I am his guardian."

"Ex-actly," assented the overseer, with an evil smile that the position of his face—in the shade, which he always affected—concealed from the lady's observation—"exactly, my dear lady, and so it shall be kept out of debt—except to me," he added, inwardly.

Erma was perfectly satisfied.

A month had hardly passed away before the whole neighborhood was enthusiastic in their commendations of Mrs. Wolfsohn's farm manager. Gen. Bibb declared that he himself would be willing to give more than double the salary for such an efficient man about his place; but he knew that another such could not be found.

Mrs. Blantyre said that she never did, to her knowledge, break the tenth commandment before; but, in the absence of the captain, she could not help coveting Erma's accomplished overseer.

Dr. Cleveland, the rector of St. James, reminded them that the young widow, in her desolation, needed such a person on her plantation more than anyone else could, and that, therefore, doubtless she had been provided with this one.

As to Erma herself, she had but one fault to find with Moses Shellval.

He came to the house too often.

Every day, and several times a day, he would come and ask to see the lady, and then he would consult her upon some trifling detail of his business.

In vain Erma assured him that she was perfectly ignorant of all agricultural affairs, and that she would much rather trust implicitly to his own judgment.

He would reply:

"I am in your service, madam, and I am responsible to you for all that I do. If you are ignorant of agricultural affairs, would it not be well that you should inform yourself of them? I am willing and anxious to assist you to acquire this knowledge."

What could Erma say?

Nothing!

She felt herself falling, day by day, more and more, under the influence of this man, whom she vaguely and secretly dreaded and distrusted, even while all the neighborhood was enthusiastic in the manager's praises.

The sequel to this story is told in another volume entitled "Her Love or Her Life," and is published in uniform style and price with this volume.

THE END.

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Who can read of the beginning of that sweet life, named Mara, which came into this world under the very shadow of the Death angel's wings, without having an intense desire to know how the premature bud blossomed? Again and again one lingers over the descriptions of the character of that baby boy Moses, who came through the tempest, amid the angry billows, pillowed on his dead mother's breast.

There is no more faithful portrayal of New England life than that which Mrs. Stowe gives in "The Pearl of Orr's Island."

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